

THE TRANSIENT HOUR

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*Translated from the French
by Eric Sutton*

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LE CHEMIN DES ÉCOLIERS
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THE TRANSIENT HOUR
(London 1948)

ABOUT an hour after midnight Michaud had a nightmare that often came upon him towards morning. He seemed to be astray in a dim country, with its skylines plunged in darkness, on the outskirts of an invisible town—possibly his native town, of which the vague, distorted image still hovered in his recollection. After walking long and aimlessly over a grey barren heathland, he had begun to lose the sense of his own entity, when before his eyes arose a timbered building whence came sounds of music and gusts of girlish laughter. Cheered by the prospect of recovering the thread of his existence, he went boldly in, but once through the door he was confronted with the same dim country as before, through which he wandered on and on, his consciousness again evaporating in a haze of bewilderment.

He did not awake until seven o'clock next day, and after wondering for a moment whether it was his liver or his conscience that was out of order, he suddenly recalled his dream. The nightmare of the dim country which visited him about once a month always left him afflicted by a kind of elemental misery, and all through the succeeding morning he was haunted by a sense of futility, an illusion of infinitude. As was usual in that cruel awakening hour, he watched the gloomy array of worries, regrets, and problems file past his inner vision: war, food, his wife's illness, business troubles, money, children, clothes, shoes, cigarettes at fifty francs a packet, secretary, politics, plumber, and all the vacillations of his own mind. From time to

time he would revert to his nightmare, in a half-hearted effort to symbolize it. The dim country represented life : the door of the timbered building and the sounds of music stood for death, with its promise of paradise or repose : once through that door life launched forth again into the same bleak distances. Or the dream might be an image of love, and love's renewals, in which the music also had its place. As he pondered on this nightmare in *grisaille*, Michaud reflected that there were never any colours in his dreams, they were all in black and white, like an old-fashioned film. He found himself wondering whether these colourless dreams were peculiar to himself ; he would ask his friends . . . but he soon forgot all about it.

Pierrette, the youngest of his three children, was dressing in the bathroom. He heard the click of bottles, and saw the movements of her silhouette against the frosted panel of the door. When she had finished she went into the boys' room to open the shutters. She was a girl of twelve, a sturdy, laughing child. She took advantage of the darkness to go through Antoine's pockets, then, throwing open the iron shutters, she went from one bed to the next and kissed her two brothers. Frederic, the eldest, responded with a grunt, and turned towards the wall. Antoine, though still half asleep, clasped his sister's face in both hands, muttered an affectionate word or two, nibbled at her ear, and snuggled down in bed again.

Having got the breakfast under way, Pierrette pulled out of her blouse the papers she had extracted from Antoine's pocket : an empty, half-torn envelope addressed to a certain lady by the name of Grandmaison at an address in the Rue Durantin, and a bit of exercise-book paper, covered with figures and abbreviations. Try as she would she could not make any sense out of these, and had to leave

her curiosity unsatisfied. In the bathroom the father burst into imprecations because his razor had been used for sharpening pencils. Though he had almost forgotten his nightmare, he was in a very black mood. The bathroom walls were damp, the soap wouldn't lather, his razor had lost its edge, life was all awry. In the mirror he could see the reflection of his large head thatched with bristly, greying hair, two bushy, blond eyebrows, and large grey angry eyes, the expression of which seemed to him rather unintelligent. His gaze lingered on the wrinkles and folds of flesh on his forehead and the pouches beneath his eyes. He already saw himself with loosening skin and a veined nose, purplish at the nostrils. His once athletic torso was showing signs of deterioration, and his pectoral muscles were beginning to sag. This time, he thought, it's the downward slope. He usually put the blame on the meagre light from the frosted glass, and scanned his haggard features for a hint of youthful briskness, a spark of vivacity. But a clear view of things and people, and a man's own self, comes only in anger, and that morning his bad temper purged his vision. In point of fact he was not sorry to be growing old. Another heave or two, a few more years on the foul galley of his detestable existence, and once his children were out in the world he could at last be content with a small income, just enough to live on alone in an attic, and spend his time reading memoirs, to which he was passionately addicted. Suddenly Michaud realized that he had forgotten to provide a place for his wife in his future existence, and he had to admit that this had happened before. A pretty state of mind to be found lurking behind his ill-temper! And this blameless lady, who had gone into a nursing-home two days before for the removal of a cyst, would be worrying much more as to how her family would get on without her than about the operation. Well, at the

hour of awakening, before his bath, a man indeed appears as he really is, said Michaud to himself; nor does the creature improve much as the day progresses. At the slightest excuse he plunges into self-admitted plaints and passionate nostalgias; and what of those silent forays, those petty treacheries, planned and effected without a flicker of remorse? Well, what matter? Our trivial iniquities, surreptitious or otherwise, are but our modest part in the concert of the major iniquity of men, nations, and peoples. This world of ours is finished, its hour is near, it is writhing in its death-throes. Beneath a leaden sky, murky with terror and cowering resignation, it lies prostrate, gasping in the rage of self-destruction, and hurls at the hinder end of death the rhythmic lamentations of its 'De Profundis'; there is comfort in the thought that humanity has damned itself without prospect of reprieve. 'Let it perish!' cried Michaud savagely: 'and if I catch anybody sharpening pencils with my razor, I'll box his ears.'

Seated at the kitchen table with his two boys, the father surveyed them with suspicious eyes, as though the blunted razor must somehow be recorded on the culprit's forehead. Antoine, a handsome youth of sixteen, had an unrevealing face, a smooth mask that looked as though it might cover strange perplexities; but his dark, long-lashed eyes mirrored an affectionate and earnest soul which made it impossible to suspect him of such criminal levity. Frederic, who already shaved every other day, was now too familiar with razors not to be revolted by the idea of such an outrage. Besides, he was as serious as his brother, and indeed took himself very seriously, which annoyed his family at times. He was good at mathematics and rather exaggerated a natural solemnity of manner which, if Pierrette were to be believed, imposed on those more knowledgeable than himself. His father was often tempted to speak roughly to him, but being himself

impervious to the simplest forms of mathematics, he was impressed by this algebraic talent.

Pierrette filled the bowls, and her father uttered an exclamation of surprise and pleasure, for what she poured into them was genuine chocolate. Frederic emerged from his meditations with rather a weary air and condescended to an expression of polite approval, but his face brightened visibly at the sight and smell of chocolate. Pierrette enjoyed astonishing her family and she laughed gleefully, her broad lips curving upwards crescent-wise, while her father burst out laughing too at the thought that she was quite capable of having borrowed his razor to sharpen her pencils.

'You can thank Antoine for the chocolate,' said she. 'He brought it home yesterday evening.'

So saying, she put on the table a plate of bread and butter.

'Butter for breakfast—I don't know what your mother would think, children. It was only yesterday that she was worrying because we should be short of butter. The black market is all very well . . .'

'No, papa, don't you worry. That came from Antoine, too.'

Antoine, bent over his bowl, did not appear to notice these expressions of satisfaction. Finally, in reply to a question, he raised his head and looked coolly at his father.

'It was a deal,' he said, in a level voice. 'Tiercelin wanted to buy a banned American novel from me: I preferred a deal, so I let him have it for a pound of butter and a small bag of powdered chocolate.'

The name of Tiercelin was growing familiar in that household. For the past month it had been constantly on Antoine's lips, though he was normally rather secretive on the subject of his friendships.

'I have never read any American novels,' observed

Frederic with a touch of complacent irony : ' but I realize that they have their merits. Anyway, it was a good bargain.'

' No, I think the book was worth much more. Tiercelin thought so too, and to make it up to me he has invited me into the country for Easter.'

Nothing in Antoine's voice or manner betrayed his apprehension of what the paternal reaction might be, nor even his eagerness to accept his school friend's invitation, but Pierrette and Frederic at once understood that his words were more especially addressed to their father.

' A fortnight in the country would certainly do you no harm,' agreed Michaud. ' With that pasty complexion and those heavy eyes of yours, you need it more than anyone. On the other hand, it's rather awkward that we don't know these people.'

Antoine picked up his father's objections and enlarged on them with sly comments that really deprived them of significance. The game was won ; it was very improbable that his mother would oppose the project. Michaud, while breakfasting, looked through a morning paper and remarked that the war seemed to be getting on very slowly. At this rate it might last for another ten years, and a separate peace might very well prolong the German occupation for ten years after that. He talked thus for the benefit of his sons, whom he would have liked to see sharing his hopes and anxieties, but the war, the misfortunes of their country, and the fate of civilization, seemed to leave them unruffled. When they were compelled to offer an opinion on current events they did no more than conform to the proprieties, and what they said was without depth or conviction. This indifference upset and alarmed Michaud. While he was thus commenting on the news, Pierrette had several matters on her mind. There were twelve slices of bread and butter on the plate, three for each person, which was all that could be allowed

under the rationing system. Each person usually kept to his three slices, except for rare oversights attributable to absence of mind, which were never brought against the offender, any such wrangles being regarded as unseemly. But on that morning, quite exceptionally, the bread was spread with butter. Greed no doubt increases absence of mind. And indeed the men—by whom Pierrette meant her father and her eldest brother, Antoine being still in her eyes a rather overgrown child—the men had in fact each consumed four slices with the ease and assurance that can only come from perfect guilelessness. Their good faith, especially her father's, was, of course, beyond suspicion, but certain unconscious offences can be a no less remorseless exposure of calculated selfishness than the worst duplicity. Another matter that depressed Pierrette was that the men, absorbed once more in their own concerns and all their gaiety forgotten, seemed no longer to notice that they were drinking chocolate for breakfast, and so rare a good fortune had already become, for them, a matter of course. They couldn't be expected to express their satisfaction after each mouthful, Pierrette quite understood that, and would have been contented with a discreet expression of appreciation ; but this indifference to such a treat, this utter absence of regard for her joy in giving them pleasure, seemed to border on ungraciousness. She began to feel rather ruefully aware of the woman's part in the family circle, and realized the significance of a remark made by her mother on a day of depression : ' Men seem to go through life in a railway carriage, looking out of the window at our troubles and anxieties.'

About eight o'clock, Michaud left his home in the Rue Berthe and went down the stairway of the Rue Foyatier ; his conscience was smarting, and he tried to pretend to himself that he hadn't quite realized what he was doing. The hand surely obeyed the stomach, and, in the absence of any

inhibition, grabbed the fourth slice. A rather discreditable reflex, but a reflex all the same. Moreover, it might so be that his consciousness received no more than one of those faint impacts that leave the will dormant, and serve only to store up remorse. Still, he thought he remembered that the beast within him had in fact had an argument with common decency, and the beast had won. Surely this was the vilest act he had ever committed. To devour his children's portion, to deliberately pilfer from their paltry allowance of bread, in the pretence that he had done so in pure absence of mind—what could be more shameful!

He lit a cigarette. Fifty francs the packet. Fifteen hundred francs a month. Eighteen thousand francs a year. Hélène's operation would cost twelve thousand, perhaps more, and he had not got the money by him yet. At home he was always complaining that too much money was spent, and last week he rejected a demand for shoes. With eighteen thousand francs he could have done much for the family feet.

The March morning was damp and cold like a return of winter. The sky was lowering and overcast, and beyond the elevated railway, on the slope of the Square Saint-Pierre, shreds of mist still drifted across the lawns. The foul weather cast a leprous glaze on to the alleys of Montmartre. A snuffling, bleary life was awakening on the pavements between the line of brimming refuse-bins and the dirty houses in which the doors gaped like pits of squalor. The entire city seemed to Michaud to be seething with remorse for purloined bread-and-butter. As he passed alongside the Square Saint-Pierre he noticed four German infantrymen walk into it, lumpish, taciturn rustics, woodenly doing their duty in looking at the sights. On the other side of the entrance gate they stopped to gaze at the mass of the Sacré-Coeur standing like a structure in white porcelain at the crest of the slope from the deserted garden, and since

that was what they were there for, they set themselves to climb it. Michaud thought he might well envy them. They, too, were doubtless burdened with the cares of a family, but they had shed their responsibilities. The problems of their respective homes concerned them no longer. God made provision. They strolled along the streets of Paris or Quimperlé, mounted guard, and cleaned their rifles: the troubles of a family, children's shoes, bread and butter, operations, now meant no more than their evening performances on the concertina, during the daily quarter of an hour devoted to absent dear ones, who were getting on as best they could. The sky of France must seem very light-some to those four field-grey infantrymen.¹

Michaud hardly ever approached the Rue de Maubeuge in which his offices were situated without feeling the impact of the events that had transformed it into what it now was. Before the occupation it was the quarter in which solid and serious business was conducted, not the kind of thing that is dispatched in a couple of telephone calls or by an exchange of cigars, but the transaction that calls for due and decorous

¹ The names of these four German soldiers were Arnold, Eisenhart, Heinecken, and Schultz. The first was killed on the Russian front. The second, wounded in the Crimea, was sent home after both his legs had been amputated, and was poisoned by his wife. Heinecken, a mild and serious man, became one of the guards at a camp of deportees. He never killed a man otherwise than under orders, except once, when he lost his temper and beat an old man's brains out with a stick. Transferred to a combatant unit in 1945, he ended as a prisoner of war in Belgium. Schultz died in Paris in a street in the Amerique quarter, on the first or second day of the uprising in August, 1944. The circumstances of his death were related to me by a shoemaker who was there. Finding himself detached from his unit, which had evacuated that quarter on the previous day, Schultz took refuge in a little café, from which he emerged drunk, without weapons, helmet, or tunic, and clad only in shirt, trousers, and boots. The inhabitants of the street began to gather round him. He staggered along, singing, and oblivious of the crowd. As he was passing the shoemaker's window, he was struck down, and in a few instants, completely dismembered. The women and children, stated the witness, were especially savage. It was just a matter of hacking off a finger, an ear, or a strip of meat. When the crowd dispersed, nothing was left of Schultz but a few smears of blood on the pavement.

negotiation. Its own activities, and the proximity of the Nord railway station, made it a centre of traffic from morning till night, apart from the constant flow of pedestrians careful of their time and money, among whom there were no idlers. The bustle in these brimming streets, congested between the tall edifices of Baron Haussmann, had never in the least appealed to Michaud. For him it was the movement of the money-hunt and the grinding toil to which he was himself condemned. Moreover, he had never succeeded in getting used to the characteristic colour of the district, which was that of stone seen through smoked glass. But since the occupation this whole area had become abysmally depressing. The emptiness of the streets disclosed sinister vistas, in which the passers-by or fleeting groups of people seemed to be caught in a flurry of wind. The rare vehicles that dashed past—a German army lorry, a few officers' cars, or automobiles helmeted with a gasogene apparatus—looked as though they were escaping from a condemned city. In those lifeless streets, from which the great offices drew no more sap, the buildings already stood like obsolete fortresses, and the district seemed to be out-living its own life, all its activities slackening in the atmosphere of a perpetual Sunday morning. Amid all this lethargy Michaud at times found himself dreaming of the vast cities engulfed beneath the centuries, the haughty Babylons where life had lost heart, abandoned its routine, and was finally engulfed by collapsing palaces.

THE office of the 'Fortune Estate Management Co. of Paris' consisted of two rooms and a vestibule on the sixth floor, immediately under the roof. Founded in 1932 with a capital of twelve thousand francs, the whole of which sum had been contributed by Pierre Michaud and his partner Étienne Lolivier, it controlled, in 1939, eleven blocks of flats. Before the war the business provided the two partners with a competent livelihood. In addition to the percentage on the rents received there were rebates on repairs, as arranged with the contractors concerned. This rather dubious practice having become pretty well a matter of course in the profession, being accepted by the property-owners, there was no need to feel uncomfortable about it though Michaud always had disliked making money in such a fashion. The office expenses were trifling, the staff comprising a typist and an office boy. Since the exodus of 1940 the business had become much less remunerative. Rents had remained at the same level in spite of the rise in the cost of living, and some were no longer paid: e.g. war-prisoners, tenants who had remained in the unoccupied zone, British subjects, and Jews who had been imprisoned or had fled. Landlords who were pressed for money would not hear of any repair work. The richer among them, such as the South-Western Assurance Society, their most important client, were indeed only too willing to undertake such operations, as the money thus employed would escape taxation; but labour and materials were hard to come by. None the less, the work of the two

partners had not been reduced in proportion. Never had there been such constant contact with public departments—the Municipal authorities, Police Headquarters, the Department for Jewish Affairs, the Departments of Justice, Health, Statistics, and Finance : it was a succession of regulations, orders, demands for information, questionnaires to be filled up, statements to be rendered. And finally, the tenants, who were now getting their accommodation very cheap having regard to the value of money, had never given so much trouble. Complaints about heating, lifts, taps, chimneys, demands for reduction of rates, disputed charges, threats—there was no end to it all.

Michaud said good morning to Solange, the typist, in a harsh and aggressive tone of voice, although her sole shortcoming in his eyes at the moment was that of being a human creature. She spoke to him with exaggerated amiability, by way of impressing on him that she was better-bred than he. She was quite a pretty girl, though slightly marred by a large nose, but she had a good figure and shapely legs, which she was inclined to exploit. Michaud cut her short.

‘While I think of it, you must type that memorandum on the Barauchet affair at once. As soon as it’s ready send the boy with it to Choudieu’s office. He hasn’t turned up yet, of course. Everyone does as he pleases here. The place is becoming a sink, and by God I won’t stand it much longer.’

Eusèbe, the office-boy, a skinny, stunted, dull-eyed youth, came in just at the moment of this outburst. Solange, being of opinion that his actual christian name, Alain, was above his station, had renamed him Eusèbe, as he was now called in the office. Michaud’s first impulse was to dash upon Eusèbe and shake him, but he contented himself with appealing to his common sense and decency. The emaciated and anaemic youth’s fragility always melted his wrath. His services were scarcely a credit to the establishment, which

was constantly exposed to complaints as a result of the half-starved boy's carelessness and lethargy. Michaud, not without trouble, had managed to keep him in his job, and had even induced his partner to agree to a rise in pay for him. From time to time he presented him with fifty francs out of his own pocket, and during the previous autumn he had procured a sack of potatoes for his mother. Eusèbe, who lied without conviction, pleaded a breakdown on the metro as an excuse for his late arrival, but he was not even listened to. In the next room Étienne Lolivier was engaged in a dispute on the telephone :

‘Believe me, if I could meet your wishes. . . . No, madame, don't say that. . . . I should be perfectly willing to come and see your lavatory, but what would be the use ? . . . It's unobtainable, but I will do my utmost.’

‘What's the matter ?’ asked Michaud, who had just come into the room.

‘The fourth floor front on the Rue Eugène-Carrière. The servant has broken the lavatory pan.’¹

‘Well, it's at their expense, so we must replace it. Lebidel put aside a dozen for us.’

Lolivier, a stocky man with a large head and ferret-eyes, eyed him quizzically :

‘If I were to listen to you, the fourth-floor front would be provided with a new lavatory-pan to-morrow, and he would take it so much for granted that we wouldn't dare make a penny profit. I propose to let him stew, and in a month's time he'll be only too glad to pay four or five thousand francs for his pan.’

¹ The tenants of this flat, ruined by the war and much in need of money, in 1943 denounced to the Gestapo an old uncle from whom they had expectations, and to whom they were actually much attached. The denunciation happened to go astray in the German official machine, so that they had nothing to regret when the luck turned in their favour. At the present time the old uncle is still alive, and his nephews are still much attached to him.

Michaud was rather taken aback, but he could find no objection to an arrangement which, at first sight, seemed in accordance with the firm's usual policy. He had sat down at his desk opposite Lolivier and began to read the morning's mail. Looking up, he surveyed for a moment the top of his partner's head, bent over his fountain pen—a broad, pink expanse, in the centre of which sprouted three tufts of downy hair.

‘I won't do it,’ said Michaud.

Lolivier lifted an eye and, with his nose on his pen, went on writing.

‘No, I won't do it. I know what you're going to say : my refusal looks like a fit of conscience which won't make any difference to the firm's policy, and we shall continue, so far as circumstances permit, to cheat the landlords who rely on our good faith.’

‘I would never have said anything of the kind,’ protested Lolivier. ‘You always use such exaggerated phrases ; you dress things up. In point of fact, the landlords only rely on our good faith in certain matters set down in black and white, and we have never cheated them out of a farthing. Our profession makes us natural intermediaries between landlords and contractors. In accepting a commission on repair work we re-establish a just equilibrium without the slightest dishonesty.’

Lolivier waved his wrist in the air, detaching the little finger from his fat, short hand. His round, tough countenance, with its line of black moustache, puckered into a knowing smile.

‘Don't be so pompous,’ said Michaud. ‘I'm always telling you it makes you look vulgar and foolish. It's a fault I have often noticed in people who came to Paris in sabots and haven't managed to get anywhere.’

‘You didn't arrive in patent leathers, I believe ?’

‘ I did not, but I knew my way about better than you did.’

Michaud had not even taken the precaution of smiling, which would have passed off his answer as a retort. Lolivier shook his head, apparently convinced that what he said was true. With their eyes fixed upon the same ink pot, they sat for a moment silently contemplating the outset of their tribulations in Paris. About 1920, on their return from the war, they had met in a private school on the Left Bank where Michaud was teaching Latin while preparing for a mastership in a Lycée. Lolivier, whose Deputy in the Auvergne had got him a post as gymnastic instructor in the same establishment, was studying for a Law Degree. After a second failure in his qualifying examination Michaud renounced the teaching career. Having had some little success as a speaker at public meetings, he had resolved to place his abilities at the service of the Socialist Party, in the hope of achieving a position in it which would give him an opportunity of serving the cause to better advantage. Consigned for several years to very menial functions, he finally abandoned the Party and embarked on a business career. Michaud often talked with great bitterness to his partner about those dreary, wasted years, when he had found it so hard to make a living. Lolivier, for his part, said almost nothing of what he had been doing during that same period, when they had pretty well lost sight of each other. He had never very clearly explained the succession of events which had left him manager of a third-rate tavern in the Rue de Douai, the proprietor of which was in process of going bankrupt, when the two former colleagues had renewed their acquaintance towards the end of 1931. In any event, there was a gap of several years in his existence, between 1925 and 1930, in regard to which his silence was absolute. Michaud was inclined to suspect that he had been engaged in some rather dubious activities.

‘With you,’ sighed Lolivier, ‘it’s always the same thing. You think yourself obliged to go one better than common morality.’

‘Not at all. I conform to the practice of my profession. But I won’t have anything to do with the black market.’

‘But the black market has now become a practice of the profession. When the contractor offers us a commission on his job he includes it in a black market price forced upon him by the shortage of materials. So what?’

‘We aren’t doing a deal with the tenants. The lavatory-pan will be sold at a fair price, I’ll see to that. This estate office is not going to become a black market shop. Understand?’

Lolivier nodded, but as he resumed his writing his little ferret eye indicated pretty clearly that for his part he did not feel the repulsion which the black market inspired in his partner.

‘Ah well,’ he said after a pause, ‘you mustn’t forget that I’m a bit of a sod.’

‘And what about me?’ replied Michaud, but with a touch of complacency that brought no comfort to his partner.

Towards the middle of the morning Michaud went into the outer room, where the staff were housed. It was furnished almost exactly like the other, and the partners faced each other at the large office table of imitation citrus wood, where they sat down turn by turn to dictate their correspondence. Michaud was in a better temper than when he arrived. On the houses opposite a reflection of white sunshine gleamed in the attic windows and gave him a glimpse of a clearer and securer world. Life was beginning to warm up and revolve. He forgot the failures of the early morning, the laborious and subterranean process of getting under way that seems to imperil the promise of the day

before. As he dictated his letters to the typist, who was seated in profile before him, he observed her rather lavish display of leg. The legs in question, slim and shapely, provided a not infrequent subject for jokes between the partners, each of them affecting to suspect the other of sinister designs. When speaking of the 'Siren's legs' they were not afraid to enliven their humour with those ponderously jovial obscenities that flash across men's conversation like gusts of wind sweeping the clouds aside and revealing patches of ingenuous sky. Solange found herself wondering why Michaud was looking at her legs in this way, and whether such curiosity was not a prelude to something more. For a long while past she had conceived and classified all the hypotheses that might affect one or other of the partners, but without being able to determine on a line of conduct. As might suit the day or mood she felt disposed to a haughty refusal or to an understanding that would gratify both partners. Her dream would have been to see one of them impelled to suicide in amorous despair; but it had to be admitted that things like this don't often happen, especially to middle-aged gentlemen in bowler hats. In point of fact, having now worked in this estate office for more than a year, Solange had begun to find their respect, which normally she would have considered her due, rather a poor compliment to her legs and her youthful glamour. Her employers' aloofness turned her thoughts to her nose, which was too long, too pointed, and devoid of character.

Michaud was still busy dictating letters to her when Lolivier came in to tell him, while he still had it in mind, a bit of news that had reached him the day before from Vichy through the medium of the cousin of a Cabinet Secretary. Under the auspices of the President of the Turkish Republic, a secret conference had just opened at Ankara between Goering, Eden, and Molotov. True, the report was

extremely dubious, not to say absurd, but it was interesting to pretend to believe it. Solange, her pencil poised, considered the angle calculated to display her legs to the best advantage. In a corner of the office, Eusèbe, his melancholy eyes filled with a sort of vegetable anguish, was folding futile envelopes, dreaming all the while of a certain chair leg, the image of which somehow lingered in his memory in detachment from its background. Michaud not less sceptical than Lolivier, consented to regard the news of the secret conference as plausible. They began by comparing the trump cards held by each delegate, and although they were not in agreement on the essential points, the tone of the conversation remained almost courteous for a while. But in such circumstances Michaud always tended to examine the moral aspect of the discussion, which then took a stormy turn. Lolivier, for his part, regarded morality as the code of victorious force. 'Our enemies, indeed, do not scruple to say so : the best doctrine will be that which is most effective. In the meantime, morality is in suspense.' Once again the dispute grew acrimonious. Michaud accused his partner of wallowing in the crudest fatalism, and of fuddling himself with the plausibilities of a bemused materialism. Lolivier charged him with talking as though he were still a school-master whose duty it was to insinuate a complacent idealism into the skulls of youthful members of the middle class. Solange sometimes interjected an undeniably sensible, but irritating comment. 'As my uncle Henry used to say, when people argue they never get any further than they were before.' Or : 'It's silly to go to war, it would be so easy to come to terms.' The two adversaries flung her a malevolent look, and resumed their dispute. Lolivier tried to maintain a suave tone which he knew to be infuriating and which soon produced its full effect. Suddenly Michaud unknotted his necktie, which was strangling him, and burst into abuse.

‘ You bone-headed Auvergne cow-pat, you think yourself bloody clever, but if you were to argue for twenty years you’d still only be a lousy tub-thumper, a hawker of positivist trash ! ’

‘ As I’ve always told you, it’s a great pity you didn’t stick to teaching, you’d certainly have got the Legion of Honour by this time. ’

‘ Oh, go to Hell ! . . . Solange, take this down : “ I have pleasure in informing you that the lavatory-pan will be replaced next week, subject to the reservation . . . ” Well, I like to say straight out what I think. You’re an anarchist incendiary, Lolivier ; you’re a hayseed amateur of opportunist realism ; you’re a bloody fake Nietzschean ! ’

‘ Thank you ! On sale here—A Handbook of Woolly Social Idealism, newly revised and corrected by a High-minded Mugwump ! ’

‘ And you’re a crooked, arrogant fool into the bargain ! And now for God’s sake shut up ! I’m busy. I’ve got a living to earn. Solange, where was I ? ’

‘ The lavatory-pan, Monsieur Michaud. ’

‘ Instead of hiding behind a lot of cockeyed arguments, why don’t you admit which side you’re really on ? ’

‘ Meaning what—precisely ? ’ asked Lolivier.

‘ Solange, take this down— ’

‘ Never mind Solange, you dirty hypocrite—answer me ! ’

‘ All right. You’re on the side of a certain kind of realism that tries to justify itself— ’

‘ In other words, I’m a Hitlerite ? ’

‘ You said it ! ’

The two partners were now close together and glaring into each other’s faces. They exploded simultaneously, vituperating each other without a pause to take breath, until their two voices blended into an indistinguishable bellowing, in which Solange and Eusèbe could only catch

from time to time a shout of—‘Swine!’ or ‘Liar!’ The bell at the outer door reduced them to silence and to a sense of their professional duties. They were still eyeing each other venomously when Eusèbe came in to say that Madame Lebon wanted to see M. Michaud.

‘Ask her to wait a moment.’

Michaud adjusted his tie, straightened his jacket, and passed his hand over his bristly grey hair. Abruptly he turned to Lolivier and asked him in a harsh voice, still charged with fury :

‘When you dream at night, do you see things in colours?’

Lolivier thought for a moment and shook his head :

‘Certainly not—at least, I don’t think so. I can clearly recall a dream I had last night. It was just like a photograph. As a matter of fact, the blacks and the whites came out even less well. The tones aren’t really those of a photograph. Well, I’m blessed if I know. In any case, no colours.’

‘I don’t remember having ever dreamed of colours either. Not long ago I even dreamed of a garden in flower. It was my father’s garden. And I’m absolutely certain there were no colours in it.’

‘With me,’ said Solange, ‘it’s just the opposite. In my dreams there are always gorgeous colours—red, green, mauve, every sort of colour.’

The two partners eyed each other. They did not believe there were colours in Solange’s dreams.

‘Type those letters as quickly as you can,’ said Michaud.

THREE

THE professor of history ¹ was discussing the Girondins with an enthusiasm he had not felt for twenty years past. In the second half of his lecture he did not trouble to formulate any pronouncements or criticisms, he gave expression to a heart shaken by defeat, the occupation, and all the bewilderment of a sensitive man. He descanted on the exploits of those young heroes of the bourgeoisie, as exuberant and vociferous as a pack of modern medical students. Conquest was then not needed for the achievement of glory in death or life. The audience, although attentive was unresponsive: the lads were interested, but aloof, they might have been listening to the story of an illicit love affair.

Antoine, faithful to a now deepset habit, was not attending to the history lesson; he was reading *Tartufe*. Despite himself, the professor's prose became involved with Molière's verse, and now and again one of Tartufe's sanctimonious tirades seemed to counter the rhetoric of Verg-

¹ Gustave Bon, Professor of History, had in 1925 married a young lady called Irma, with a rather dominating disposition, and an acute and practical mind. She had a just sense of effective realities, a deep distrust of ideas, and a genius for organization and the ascertainment of fact, for which her existence as a state official's wife offered little scope. As she was not tempted by the pleasures of adultery, these aptitudes weighed heavily on the professor, whose tastes lay in the direction of flowers, fields, socialism, the concertina, soft collars, and little volumes of poetry. Having endured much from Irma's moods, he had come to distinguish two main currents of evolution in the history of humanity, which he called Irmaism and Gustavism. In 1936 he believed in the triumph of Gustavism, in May, 1940, in that of Irmaism, in August, 1944, in the final restoration of Gustavism. To-day, the professor is rather downcast. He is courageously trying to believe in a future for Gustavism.

niaud or Barbaroux. Antoine Michaud felt no antipathy to the Girondins, but in his opinion the science of history was a detestable absurdity that spoilt the pleasure of life for succeeding generations by robbing them of the joy of discovering it in their own impulses : it was like preparing them for the joys of love by school instruction in the mechanism of sex from an illustrated alphabet of vaginas, prostates, and suchlike unpleasantnesses. He would not have dared to say this to his father, who had a taste for history (older people get bored with life), but the only history which, if pressed, he would have accepted, was the history taught in certain girls' schools, a history populated by such figures as Saint Louis, Bayard, and Sergeant Bobilot ; the rest was so much pompous nonsense, a bedevilment of the present by the past. He could, indeed, have made the same comments on Tartufe. Why thrust such a ruffian under our noses, when life is so glorious, and love so delightful ? And, more generally, why should our existences have to conform to the lucubrations of old gentlemen with ribbons in their button-holes, instead of plunging forward in a morning glory of their own ? Antoine Michaud, schoolboy, wondered what on earth he was doing in that lycée.

At the front desk, Pierre Tiercelin, Antoine's particular friend, never took his eyes off the history professor. A well-dressed and good-looking boy, he always behaved with a decorum and self-possession that procured him the more or less hostile respect of his fellows. The thrashing he had inflicted two years before on a philosophy student who had provoked him on emerging from the lycée, was a memory that still survived. He was the son of a restaurant-keeper on the Rue de la Rochefoucauld, and the barman in the basement, in the 'jazz' tradition, had christened him Paul, as he already bore the name of Pierre ; and he was Paul to his friend Antoine Michaud. Though more or less impervious

to the romantic and sublime in general, Paul Tiercelin had no prejudice against history. He had always been interested in the lives of great men. He followed the professor's lesson without letting his attention wander, and had for the Girondins the same feeling of distant sympathy that was inspired in him, at the paternal bar, by the virginal youths of good family doomed to fall for the girls who haunted that resort.

On leaving the lycée the two friends walked a little way together. The upper branches of the trees were lost in a lowering white mist that moistened the roadway and the pavements of the Boulevard de Clichy. Among the passers-by sauntered a number of German soldiers, in blue, khaki, or field-grey, under the watchful eyes of the girls of the district. At the approach of evening the cafés began to fill up, and from certain bars where the radio was turned full on came bursts of raucous music, interspersed with the cries and laughter of their raffish clientèle. Keeping a careful lookout for the police, a few furtive negresses made play with their hips and eyes in attempts to allure these warriors of the master race. An old gentleman with the collar of his coat turned up, who possibly still retained the respect of his concierge, held out a mendicant hand as he sang the great aria from *Lakmé*. Paul watched this movement of the sidewalks with the eye of a racing man on the course, and thanks to the experience acquired in his father's bar, he was aware of all its undercurrents.

The women looked with interest, and sometimes with insistence, at this tall and elegant lad, but Paul met their meaning looks with an utter and quite unaffected indifference. Time and again he recognized a lady-client of his father's establishment and greeted her with a non-committal smile on his handsome face. Antoine, wearing a threadbare overcoat that had belonged to his brother, looked, compared

with his prosperous school-friend, like a typical poor and rather shabby schoolboy, and passed unnoticed by the women, as Paul nonchalantly observed. He had for a long time realized that the hearts of well-dressed women do not throb for poor young men, and he even believed that in them the sexual instinct is so susceptible to social categories that it serves them as a compass through the world. Antoine did not in fact notice the women as they passed. A faint flush of enjoyment made his youthful face look younger still, and Paul threw a furtive sidelong glance at him more than once, wondering what was behind that inward smile, the reflection of which now shone in his companion's eyes. When they reached the corner of the Rue Germain-Pilon, Antoine stopped, but Paul led him on, and said: 'No, not this evening.'

'Have you had a row with Flora?' asked Antoine.

'No, but—women, you know. . . . I was thinking about it just now in the history lesson. I said to myself—in order to make love, you have to undress, which takes time, and then when all is over, it didn't amount to much.'

Paul paused, in expectation of a word of commendation from his companion, which did not come.

'Making love may be all very well as an occupation for a leisured middle age, but we can surely find better ways of using our time.'

'It has never stopped me from doing other things.'

'But that's just what it does do. Take your own case. You think about nothing else. Your eyes are always goggling with it. And between ourselves, it doesn't tend to make you look intelligent.'

Antoine blushed and murmured: 'I love her, I never pretended I didn't.'

'The result being that you, the prize pupil of last year, have become a second-rate schoolboy like me, in the very

year of the certificate exam. For me, diplomas and all that sort of thing are of no importance. But yours is a sensitive little character. You need to elevate your mind, to construct a little museum inside your head and exhibit it to connoisseurs. That will be your only defence in life.'

'I don't quite see what profession you are thinking of.'

'You understand what I mean. And owing to Yvette, you are in process of losing what you most need. Believe me, love is like a pipe. When a fellow has a pipe-stem between his teeth he feels he's doing something important. I know. One evening this summer, in the bar, I was talking to a quite intelligent chap, and suddenly I saw myself in the mirror. With clenched teeth and glaring eyes, I looked the very image of a pompous ass who thinks his pipe is a reply to everything. So I gave up smoking. And I'm going to give up women too. But to do that I don't need to see myself in the glass, I have only to look at you. You imagine that in sleeping with Yvette you are doing something important.'

'I don't imagine any such thing, I'm happy, that's all. I don't ask myself any questions. As for you, what are the important things that Flora prevents you from doing?'

'Nothing in particular,' answered Paul. 'But I need to feel myself in form.'

'In form for what?'

Antoine's question remained unanswered. They had reached the square at the Place Blanche. Before they parted Paul produced an envelope from his pocket and handed it to his companion.

'Your share of last week. Incidentally, don't get the idea that you're a big business man because you make thirty thousand francs a month at this racket. Anyone can do it if they're on the inside. That's another little game I should like to drop, by the way. Good night.'

Antoine went at a run up the steep incline of the Rue Lepic. Along the pavements policemen were marshalling the long, packed lines of customers standing in queues outside the grocers' shop. In the Rue Durantin he turned into a dark alley, redolent of cooking and decaying refuse, and walked up three flights of stairs in the half-darkness. The moment he pressed the bell a young woman who had heard his step on the staircase, opened the door and flung herself upon him. They were about the same height, but Yvette, who would soon be twenty-six, was past the growing age. She was a pretty creature, with a delicately modelled face, her hair bunched into a crest and cascading down her neck ; she had an air of languid grace, and there was something lingering in all her looks and gestures. In her eyes gleamed the reflection of slowly moving waters. Clapsed in each others' arms they crossed a shabby hall covered with a faded wallpaper so blistered that it had split in many places, and entered a small, light room upholstered in cream-coloured cretonne, and furnished in the style of the modern boudoir, but with something of a bathroom air in its multiplicity of mirrors and nickel fittings, all aglitter with black-market money. Yvette drew the boy on to the sofa, and fixing her heavy eyes on him, took his head between her hands. He gave the usual ecstatic answers to the innumerable questions she put to him every evening : did he love her?—did he love her as much as at the beginning of the year?—had he thought about her that afternoon . . . ?

Fired by her own words, Yvette watched a glimmer of madness come into the boy's wide eyes, though he always knew that the whole thing was a game, or at best a fantasy on the theme of love.

' I can't stay more than half an hour. I have to go and see Mother at the clinic. Have you written to your husband ? '

Yvette smiled with a false air of contrition, but Antoine did not laugh.

‘Look here, Yvette, your letter ought to have been sent a week ago. You are really too bad. The poor man just lives for your letters, think what a prisoner’s life must be like ! It’s melancholy enough as it is.’

‘Why do you say that ?’

‘It’s the truth.’

‘But if my husband wasn’t a prisoner I should never have known you. So you see, darling, it’s fortunate that he is a prisoner, and it’s fortunate that there was a war and we were beaten. A bit of good luck all round, don’t you think ?’

‘Be quiet. You simply must write to-day.’

Antoine spoke with girlish gentleness and with a man’s authority.

‘Very well, I’ll write. But I simply don’t know what to say. You might make a rough copy for me, Antoine.’

‘Don’t be silly. How could I do such a thing . . . ?’

‘You don’t love me.’

‘Besides, as I told you, I’m in a hurry. Why I haven’t even had time to write out my French essay for to-morrow.’

‘Why not ask Coutelier to do it for you ? I’ll go and see him later on. And he could write my letter for me, too.’

‘No,’ exclaimed Antoine, ‘that he certainly shan’t do. I will.’

He sat down at an elegant little bureau near the window and paused for a moment or two to collect his ideas. Face downwards on the sofa, Yvette watched him.

‘Don’t look at me. It cramps my style.’

He moved his chair so as to block her view of the paper, and began :

‘I duly received your nice letter of the so-and-so, and my heart quite throbbed as I opened it. I am always hoping to read that you are coming home soon, that is what helps me

to live, as I count up all the days since we have been parted. Only last night I dreamt that I was in your Stalag, and that you were waiting for me in the doorway of your hut. How happy I felt, Jean, and how sorry I was to awaken from such a lovely dream. . . . Never mind ; I am sure that one day the reality will be lovelier still, and that we shall be reunited forever, as we have never ceased to be in our thoughts.'

He wrote without embarrassment or compunction, as though he were composing an essay, and the feeling in his mind was no less sincere than kindly.

'Hasn't Chou come back?' he asked, without lifting his pen.

'Yes, but I sent her out to do some errands.'

'Has she had her supper?'

'I don't know . . . no. Here she is : I'll give it her.'

A small girl came in, as pretty as Yvette, but with a spark of vivacity and candour in her eye.

'Chou,' said her mother, 'I have forbidden you to come in without knocking. How many times am I to tell you . . . ?'

Antoine had turned round, and held out his arms to the child.

'Don't bother Antoine,' said Yvette. 'He's writing to Papa.'

'Why?'

'Come and get your supper.'

Antoine went on writing. 'Chou is such a good little girl, so affectionate, and very intelligent for six years old. You may be proud of her. We both of us often talk about you.'

Chou came back from the kitchen with a thick slice of bread and butter in each hand.

'Here's one for you.'

'Thank you very much, Chou, but I'll give you my share. I never eat at this time, as you know.'

Guessing that he was much tempted, Chou persisted, and held the bread and butter under his nose. Antoine had to exert his will not to give way. In the matter of food he would not take advantage of the thirty or thirty-five thousand francs a month he made on the black market, and did not allow himself to eat anything away from home which his family could not share. The struggle was often hard, but until then he had not broken his resolve, except when compelled, and he suffered the same pangs of hunger as his brother and his sister. Yvette brought in a man with white hair, white collar and cuffs, and a ribbon in his buttonhole.

‘Monsieur L’Inspecteur,’ said Antoine, after due exchange of courtesies, ‘I have to send in an essay to-morrow evening, and I haven’t the time to write it. If you could let me have four pages of stuff I would copy them out this evening.’

M. Coutelier, a retired Inspector of primary schools, felt his professional conscience recoil at this proposal, and the affable smile he had assumed on entering vanished from his face. At that moment he forgot his four grandchildren who, owing to the war, were now on his hands, their mother having been killed during the exodus of 1940 and the father, a Jew, being interned at Drancy. Having no means beyond his official pension, and owing to his age not being able to get any regular employment, he earned a little money by odd jobs for the neighbours and a few tradesmen of the district, picked up some tips, ran errands, queued up outside a shop or one of the side-doors at the Town Hall, stuck on labels for a grocer in the Rue Lepic, and sometimes acted as deputy for a concierge. Absolutely conscientious, he conceived himself as endowed with classic nobility of character, and lived in contemplation of the gratifying contrast between the tasks to which he had to condescend, and his exalted attainments as Inspector.

‘Monsieur,’ he said, in the icy voice that had brought the

sweat to the brows of the schoolmasters of 1920, 'you should not ask me such a service.'

Antoine blushed and pleaded his mother's illness. He was really rather embarrassed, and Yvette, who noticed it, interjected :

'Two hundred francs, Monsieur Coutelier.'

'Really, Madame . . .'

'Three hundred.'

At these words the Inspector had a sudden vision of his two grandsons' knickerbockers, which he had observed that very morning. Apart from the threadbare fabric which was on the point of giving way, they scarcely reached half-way down the boys' thighs.

'As an exception and in view of all the circumstances . . . What is the theme ?'

'How the idea of patriotism arises and develops in the human mind, and how it actually encourages the love of humanity as a whole.'

'A grand subject. An admirable subject. Patriotism—Humanity. France alone holds the secret of such harmonies. Which is why she is eternal, Monsieur.'

'Obviously,' said Antoine ; 'It needn't be very long ; I shall have very little time to copy it out.'

'That is a pity ; however, I will confine myself to the essential points, but there is much to be said.'

'And, Monsieur l'Inspecteur, I would like to settle up at once.'

He produced from his pocket the money given him by Tiercelin. Observing the fistful of thousand-franc notes in a schoolboy's grubby hands, the old man scented dubious dealings between the young woman and Antoine. In his view the lad was too young to be taking part in any sort of mercenary intrigue with a woman, but both of them might well be cogwheels in a black market organization. He saw

in this a relatively respectable explanation of Yvette's elegant frocks and the costly and rather showy fitments of her sitting room. In his eyes the black market was a phenomenon governed by the law of supply and demand. It was something like a heroic survival of liberal economy, checking the tyranny of Fascism, and its illegality could hardly be objected to at a time when all regulations were more or less earmarked by the occupying authority.

'You are very young to be handling such large sums,' he could not help observing.

Antoine could find no answer, he felt as shamefaced as a child caught by a grown-up person smoking a cigarette. Yvette took three hundred-franc notes from his hand and said, as she gave them to the Inspector :

'Here you are. But I say, Antoine, couldn't you find a job for this poor man, he is terribly in need of one. You might let him have some coffee or cigarettes to dispose of, eh?'

She put her arms round Antoine's neck and kissed him on the mouth with ostentatious ardour.

'You will try and give him a job, won't you, darling?'

'Madame,' retorted the old gentleman, 'I thank you for your kindness, but I don't feel qualified for that kind of thing, and I fear your son would not find me the sort of person he wants.'

He bowed and made his way to the door, which Yvette slammed behind him. Antoine, overcome by this passage-of-arms, sat down on the sofa. The old gentleman's astonishment at the thousand-franc notes had seemed to him perfectly legitimate. He himself always felt upset when he thought of his huge gains. It was not that he had any scruple about playing the black market, but he had learned in the family circle to think of large sums of money as representing mortal sin, and the tens of thousands of francs made without effort and spent by Yvette with such childish caprice, seemed

to insult his parents' daylong difficulties and worries. His anxiety to find some means of adding to the family menu was even subject to some hesitation, and the fear that this pious fraud might, after all, lead to no good in the end.

'What's the matter? Have I upset you? Are you angry with me for snubbing the old man? It was his fault. He ought to have been more tactful. I thought he was going to accuse you of having stolen the money.'

'He was astonished to see so much money in my hands. And it *is* astonishing. He didn't know that it took me a week to make those eight thousand five hundred francs. My father can only just make as much in a month. And he has to work for it far harder than I do.'

'That's just too bad, but it doesn't concern Coutelier.'

'He certainly needn't have mentioned it. A cleverer and less honest man would have held his tongue. Now he knows what our relations are he'll have something more to be astonished at.'

'Did you notice the old man's face when he saw us kissing!'

The vision set Yvette laughing. Antoine himself, despite his depression and anxiety, could not help laughing too, but his boyish face soon lengthened again. As he reflected on the incident and the old man's retort it occurred to him that his love affair with Yvette had been just as easy as the black market money, which had been, and still was, a more important element in the adventure than appeared at first sight. Not that Antoine questioned Yvette's feelings, but he remembered having heard Tiercelin say that women's feelings, however spontaneous, are almost always determined by rational considerations, and that money plays a part in masculine sex appeal. As always, Tiercelin had affirmed this as a private conviction of his own because he never tried to show off. Even admitting that his experience

was limited to a particular environment it was precisely in that environment—the bar of the *Pomme d'Adam*—that Antoine had met Yvette. Moreover, as he had recently discovered, lovers' intimacy, however delightful, does not necessarily imply much understanding, nor very many points of contact.

'Darling, you're depressed—do tell me why.'

Antoine's throat contracted and he did not answer, fearing he might blurt out one of the thoughts that now beset his mind. He had put his bundle of thousand-franc notes on the sofa and eyed it with hostility. Yvette sat down beside him, took his head in her hands and tried to make him look at her. He sat motionless and reluctant, with eyes downcast. Finally he gave way, their eyes met, and she cried in a husky tone, with an ardour that flushed her face.

'Antoine, you mustn't do any more on the black market. Never again—promise me faithfully. I'll look for a job to-morrow. The Inspector is quite right, you are too young to be fussing about money and business. Rather than let you go on I would sooner not see you again, darling. But I'll get a job, and we shall be much happier. There won't be this money between us, which upsets us and spoils everything. If you only knew how I hate myself for not having said this to you before !'

Ashamed of his recent unkind thoughts, Antoine, now reassured and happy, plunged once more into the agreeable haze of love, which a harsh reality had momentarily dispelled, and where two beings and two wills now seemed to merge. He reproached himself for the monstrous and foolish notions that had come into his mind, and melted into Yvette's arms as she mingled her tears with his. Chou, once again, came in without knocking. It was not the first time that she had seen her mother kissing and caressing Antoine. She herself rather liked jumping into his arms and tickling

him, but thought that was a silly game for a woman. As she approached them and surveyed their endearments, they fell apart and slowly turned towards her: their eyes were blurred and heavy, their faces set and rather brutish. Chou felt frightened and looked at them in open-mouthed bewilderment; than all three of them seemed to awaken from the self-same trance. Yvette smiled with amusement, Antoine repeated that it was late, and, embarrassed by the look in Chou's eyes, hurriedly collected his books and his overcoat.

'Darling, I forgot to tell you that Marco telephoned just now to ask if you still had any English cigarettes.'

'Not one, but I'm certain to have some to-morrow. Seventy francs a packet. Did he say anything about chocolate?'

'I mentioned it to him but he promptly changed the subject, which seemed to me odd. I wonder if Paul's barman isn't pinching some of your clients. You ought to ask Paul to let you have the stuff. It doesn't take up much space, we could keep it in Chou's room.'

'That would be risky for both of us. Even if it's a little inconvenient, I would prefer to stay as an agent on commission. It's simpler and safer.'

'But you make less money. You do really—think it over.'

In the street Antoine smiled again at Yvette's delightful inconsequence. Without quite grasping his own train of thought he found himself thinking of a certain type of liar whose every lie is a link in a succession of genuine impulses of sincerity. Among the boys in his own class he had a friend who was a practised hand at this kind of genial prevarication, and he had quickly learned the secret.

Pierrette and Frederic were visiting their mother. Sitting in an embarrassed silence at the head of her bed they watched

her anguish as she braced herself against the pangs that gripped her stomach. Her face pale and drawn, her eyes deep-set in blueish circles, Hélène Michaud now and again looked at her two children with soft and loving eyes, which were too soon dimmed by pain. Pierrette did her best to assume a sympathetic but discreetly cheerful look, intended to be both affectionate and reassuring. Frederic, who found it difficult to adopt any given expression, sat with a blank look on his face : the time seemed to drag, but he no less than his sister felt a little rueful at the thought that the suffering of one so near to them should not arouse a more direct response. Antoine's arrival was a relief to them both. Between his mother and him there was a special intimacy, based on a true affinity of heart and mind, and a feeling for the finer shades which enabled them to understand each other with a look, while a tactless word or act made them both equally uncomfortable. Since Antoine had grown older their mutual confidence had developed into a sort of family collusion, but these hinted understandings were never in any way preconcerted, and seemed indeed wholly casual. In this discreet interplay he was cleverer than his mother. Hélène Michaud, for instance, had scarcely an inkling of her son's love affair, while he had long since understood the incompatibilities that had produced the latent cleavage which, masked by a good understanding, existed between his parents. Antoine had a subtle comprehension which, as concerning his own people, was backed by an alert affection. He was the first to suspect the seriousness of a malady which his mother had tried to hide, and his love for her was such that he alone had noticed its progress on her face. It was also at his instance that she had consented to be treated and finally to enter a clinic. Hélène Michaud knew better than anyone how to appreciate the gifts of her slightly more favoured son, but she was sometimes alarmed to see in him

a tolerance beyond his years and an over-rational acceptance of reality, which seemed to her rather out of key with his taste for the robust forms of moral discipline. And she blamed her husband for dissuading him, and the other children, from every form of religious practice.

Antoine sat down at his mother's bedside and managed to distract her a little by his account of domestic affairs. The line he took was not so much to assure her that they were managing very well, as to make her feel in how many ways she had been missed, feeling very sure that in her inmost self and in spite of her anxiety as to how they might be getting on, she was especially afraid that her presence was not indispensable. But in dwelling on their domestic difficulties he did not forget to stress the efforts of Pierrette, Frederic, and their father, and to present each one of them in a favourable light. He always did his best to maintain harmony in the bosom of the family and he was very adept at soothing wounded pride and casting a decent veil over displays of selfishness. After his arrival, Hélène, in spite of her pain, could bask in the grateful sense that she was indeed sadly missed at home. As Antoine was describing that day's lunch, Pierrette happened to mention a certain old, chipped dish, and the recollection of that familiar object so upset their mother that she burst into tears. Taking this as a fateful omen, the children were quite overcome, flung themselves on to the sick woman and wept too. Frederic, not being of a sensitive disposition, was surprised to find himself overtaken by emotion, and began to sob like a saxophone, whereupon, in an access of panic, Pierrette also began to sob, calling out 'Mother!' as she clutched her in her arms.

'Be quiet!' exclaimed Antoine. 'Don't be so silly.'

Michaud, who had just arrived at the clinic, heard from outside Hélène's door these concerted lamentations. He

entered, white with fear, and saw his children huddled against his wife's pillow so that her face was hidden.

'What on earth is the matter?' he faltered.

Hélène, pushing Pierrette aside, turned her tear-stained face towards him and explained how she had been overtaken by a sudden and foolish access of emotion. Frederic, who had not been able to recover his composure, stood with heaving shoulders still in tears. Michaud's alarm turned to wrath. Taking his eldest son aside, he said:

'Get out of this, you young fool, and take your sister with you.'

Antoine remained for a moment alone with his parents. Michaud looked at his wife with anxious tenderness and compassion, asked her whether she was in much pain, and was she warm enough, and smoothed her pillows. Hélène was grateful to him, and showed it. But that moment of warmth could not bridge nor mask the gap that had always parted them. Antoine had often wondered why, when they were discussing some commonplace matter, his parents never seemed to be talking about the same thing. It was rather as if one of them was myopic and the other long-sighted. For Michaud—family, marriage, work, the meat upon the table, were no more than the structure or components of vast combinations always more or less present to his mind, and which he was always in process of reconstructing and reshaping. In this mobile universe there was no immutable place for anything, and the order and value of things varied with his view of them. In the domestic circle this is extremely tiresome. Michaud lived, moreover, in a state of nostalgia for a happiness which could scarcely be conceived as realizable, and its changing implications depended on the movements of his imagination. For Hélène the universe was rooted in the family hearth, and happiness was a citadel with solid ramparts, the siege of which she had

doggedly undertaken, without unreasonable hope, and regretting that her husband took so little part in it. As he looked at this tall man, so gentle, strong, and generous, and at the woman, with her haggard face and greying hair, strong also and unselfish, Antoine thought once more of the unbridgeable and eternal gulf between two human beings who loved each other with such close affection. To tell the truth he was acutely conscious of this essential discord without being able to define its nature, and he could do no more than recognize the symptoms as they appeared. However, since he had known Yvette, a commendably simple explanation had gradually impressed itself upon his mind. He had discovered that his father was a man and his mother a woman, both of them being of solid stuff and sound complexion, not like those husbands and wives, each of whom advances half-way in order to sink into a state of placid compromise.

‘Has Antoine told you about his school friend who has invited him down to the country?’ asked Michaud.

‘No, not yet,’ said Antoine. ‘It’s Tiercelin, a fellow in my class, who wants me to spend a few days with him in Burgundy during the Easter holidays.’

‘That will be all right,’ said Hélène. ‘You certainly need a change. I think you’ve got thinner.’

‘I want to ask you something,’ said Michaud with a smile. ‘When you dream, do you see things in colour?’

FOUR

It was never without a feeling of embarrassment that Michaud visited the handsome block of flats in the Rue de Prony, of which his firm had taken over the management in 1940. The moment he entered the vestibule, with its marble, mirrored walls, and stepped on to the rich beige carpet that swept upwards into the perspective of the staircase, he felt like an accomplice of wealth. The concierges, formerly accustomed to the owner's bowler hat and immaculate manner, were rather condescendingly affable to this somewhat slovenly agent who did not look quite up to the managements of flats in the Monceau district.

'Good morning,' said Michaud, intentionally keeping his hat on. 'Have the workmen come?'

'Yes, indeed,' sighed the concierge. 'Your workmen have come.'

'Don't I know it!' said the concierge's wife. 'They've made a horrid mess of the staircase.'

The pair were sitting at an ebony table, she knitting, he reading a large medical dictionary open at a page of extremely realistic coloured plates. The lodge, meticulously furnished and equipped by the landlord, looked like a luxury cabin on an Atlantic liner. Both of them had fresh-coloured complexions and were dressed exactly as befitted their station. Michaud asked whether the work had been satisfactorily done.

'It isn't what one could call a finished job,' observed the concierge. 'I don't want to say anything against your

contractor, but one can see that he isn't used to buildings of this kind. M. Puget's contractor was quite another story. His men did their work like artists. By the way, I have some news of M. Puget. He wants you to get the central heating system tested.'

'Is he coming to Paris soon?'

They both eyed Michaud reproachfully.

'No, M. Puget will not visit Paris until the war is over. He won't have any dealings with the Germans. With him, honour comes first. He is much attached to his property, but he will never consent to share the pavement with an enemy.'¹

The concierge's wife then intervened in praise of M. Puget's patriotism. A loyal Frenchman, he had placed his abilities and his character at the service of his fellow citizens. The Vichy Minister for Agriculture had entrusted him with a mission in the Department of the Dordogne. Michaud slipped out to visit the upper floors and the concierge returned to his dictionary of medicine. He had begun the work at the chapters on the organs of reproduction, as the bowels, though he recognized their usefulness, seemed to him of minor interest.

'An odd sort of agent,' said he, after a yawn. 'I don't understand M. Puget. Did you notice his overcoat?'

'I nearly told him to take the service staircase. A man with neither manners nor conversation. When I think of M. Puget!—so polite and affable.'

¹ M. Puget was not to return to Paris until the beginning of 1943. The presence of Germans everywhere was less irksome to him than he had thought. Since the liberation, he has found himself increasingly regretting the time of the occupation, or at least the prospects of order and security which it held out. All things considered, he cannot conceive anything worse than the rise of Communism, the nationalizations of industry, and the threats of impoverishment that bear so heavily on the tenants of expensive flats. However, he hopes that a strong man will restore order, security, and prosperity, and that a war will soon break out between the United States and Russia. His concierges share his views.

‘There’s no comparison. M. Puget belongs to the same world as his tenants. Flats in Paris, estates in the country, and a family vault at Passy. I wonder where this fellow Michaud is likely to be buried.’

Michaud was not concerned about his place of burial. When he called to inspect the repairs carried out in the bathroom of a tenant on the first floor he found him shaving. M. de Monboquin, ex-Colonel of cavalry, in retirement since 1930, apologized in an amiable word or two and was continuing to shave, when his wife, who had been informed by the servant of the agent’s visit, suddenly appeared in the bathroom.

‘What, Emile—shaving?’ she said in a voice that shook with wrath.

The Colonel, a small emaciated personage, trembled with alarm, and catching Madame de Monboquin’s eye in the mirror, hurriedly looked down at the floor.

‘You startled me,’ he said mildly, ‘I nearly cut myself.’

‘Shaving! So you really intend to go out this evening. You, a colonel in the French army! Look me in the face.’

M. de Monboquin turned his lathered countenance towards her, and, his eyelids fluttering with emotion, braved his wife’s stern gaze for a brief moment.

‘Look here, Bertrande, do be reasonable: why all this fuss over a thing . . . a thing . . .’

‘A thing, indeed! An abomination, you mean.’

‘You are unfair, my dear. I don’t see how archæology can be an abomination. The Celto-Ligurian civilization . . .’

‘Emile,’ snapped Madame de Monboquin, ‘don’t be hypocritical. I said—abomination. Archæology has nothing to do with it.’

Michaud cut short his inspection, bowed to his tenants, and made as though to leave.

‘Monsieur,’ said the Colonel’s wife, ‘pray stay a moment if you please. I should be glad of your opinion.’

‘Look here, Bertrande, really!’ protested the little old gentleman. ‘This affair can scarcely interest Monsieur.’

‘I, on the contrary, think it *will* interest Monsieur, as it should interest all good Frenchmen.’

Michaud, out of consideration for the unhappy Colonel, pretended he was anxious to get away, but curiosity kept him back. Madame de Monboquin explained the case. Her husband had already dishonoured himself once by publishing, under the Teutonic heel, a little book containing a brief account of the remains of a flourishing Celto-Ligurian civilization in the valley of the Eure. In his opinion the matter of the book was quite harmless, having no reference to current events and containing nothing of which the Germans could take advantage. None the less, the book had appeared under German authorization and, in a word, with their consent.

‘But we can’t eat or sleep or walk without their consent,’ observed the Colonel.

‘That seems to please you.’

The Colonel had not actually accepted money from the enemy, but certain collaborationist newspapers, in reviewing his book, had made a remark or two that had rather gone to his head. ‘Don’t protest, Emile. I mean exactly what I say: it went to your head, it filled you with pride and satisfaction.’

But that was a trifle. His author’s vanity had reached the point of delirium since the German Institute had invited him to an archæological conference. Instead of regarding the invitation as an insult, he felt flattered by it.

‘Not at all. My motive is one of curiosity, and in no way discreditable. Science is an international affair.’

‘If you had rather more heart than head, you would not try to collect smiles and compliments from the enemy.’

‘I am astonished to hear you talk in this way. There was a time, and not so long ago, when you thought it quite in order that M. de Saint-Préleau, your ancestor, and a retired soldier like myself, should have been received at table by Prince Eugène during the invasion of France by the Imperialists. I might add that you were proud of it.’

‘That was in the seventeenth century,’ replied Madame de Monboquin, who did not know much history. ‘Customs were different in those days.’

‘Isn’t honour just a custom?’

‘Instead of quibbling you should be thinking of our son. You don’t know the best of it, Monsieur. My husband has a son with de Gaulle. What about that?’

Michaud was embarrassed. Fundamentally, he was on the wife’s side, but he was touched by the Colonel’s distress and found himself hoping he would prevail. Pressed for an answer, his convictions won the day.

‘Perhaps the young men with de Gaulle are less meticulous than we are, though they certainly don’t give that impression. In point of fact, that isn’t quite the question. Prince Eugène could perfectly well invite Madame de Monboquin’s ancestor to dinner. It was a courteous gesture which did not cover any propagandist aim.’

‘How do you know?’ retorted the Colonel. ‘Propaganda is not a modern invention.’

‘In any case, it wasn’t a weapon of war, nor a method of government. In the old days, in peace as in war, chance played a greater part than man. An army was more concerned with weather and disease than with the enemy. Diplomacy depended on a courier’s luck. A government did not cope with an event until long after it had happened, and only provided for margins of conduct, broad lines between which the individual could move. . . .’

As against these old times, Michaud launched into a

description of a bleak world, narrowly subjected to rules of accountancy, in which every individual's action, words, thoughts, meals, are translated into figures and appear as a vast addition sum, the total of which stands for the achievement of a policy or the outcome of a battle.

'As a retired Colonel, Officer of the Legion of Honour, and archæologist, a certain coefficient of propaganda must attach to your person which will favour Hitler's cause if you accept the German Institute's invitation.'

M. de Monboquin seemed to be crushed by the weight of these inexorable words. As yet only half-shaved he had put down his razor and stood, a limp, dejected figure, with head bent and arms dangling at his sides.

'You are perfectly right,' he murmured.

'Well then, Emile, you admit your folly. But it needed someone more experienced than myself to impress it on you.'

M. de Monboquin passed a damp towel over his face.

'You have only shaved one side of your face. You must finish shaving. The fact that you are not going to see the Germans is no reason for . . .'

But the Colonel having powdered his shaved cheek, turned to Michaud, nodded, and went out of the bathroom.

'I'm sure he's going to bed. Since the restrictions he has been very difficult. If I had been alone I should have had great trouble in preventing him from going to that meeting, and I might have failed. Your intervention saved him, and has probably stopped this sort of thing once for all.'

'I feel rather remorseful,' said Michaud. 'After all, he could have gone to the meeting without damage to anybody or anything, and as to the point of honour, each man for himself. I wonder how I could have allowed myself to talk such nonsense. It was contrary to my ideas and to my fundamental principles. If the world had really developed

into what I described to your husband, the outcome of the war would not matter, nor the victory of any political party.'

Madame de Monboquin looked rather quizzically at this tall, voluble, slovenly man, at the mercy of the ideas seething in his large head, the sort of person that her rather limited reading had accustomed her to view as the typically kindly revolutionary—no less deleterious than the other kind. Half-forgetful of her presence, Michaud pursued the train of his thoughts.

'It's because I won't have anything to do with such a world that I'm a Gaullist. I believe in liberty. I'm for de Gaulle because I want everyone to be free to do the other thing, the Colonel to go to the German Institute, and everyone to choose whether to back the English or the Germans. . . . Dear, dear,' said Michaud, 'this is awful. Again I don't believe a word of what I'm saying. The fact is, we shouldn't try to explain ourselves, we should rely on a certain instinct for the right thing. Vague it may be, but it's our surest guide.'

'I couldn't agree more. I rely on intuitions, and I understand myself best when I don't argue.'

Michaud was still angry with himself. Madame de Monboquin's approval seemed to condemn his own words.

'People with secure and solid incomes don't risk anything in trying to explain their feelings,' he said acidly.

Leaving the Colonel's wife to digest this ambiguous remark, he took his leave abruptly in order to avoid what would probably be a rather condescending farewell. As he walked up to the fifth floor he first reproached himself with having wasted precious time over such gilded nonentities, then admitted that this was not a fair description of the Colonel, and felt sorry he hadn't taken his part against the old girl. As he mounted the staircase the lift passed him.

A lovely young woman,¹ tall, fair-haired, sheathed in a creation by a great dressmaker, stood erect and motionless inside it. The ascending movement elongated her silhouette until it vanished in the upper floors, while Michaud paused a moment to inhale a waft of costly perfume. For an instant he was assailed by a longing for a life of gay and brilliant prodigality and dreamed of an existence, impervious to war, in the wake of this beautiful creature. However, he promptly recovered himself, thought with something like affection of the troubles, worries, and risks of his own life, and felt quite touched to realize that the warm atmosphere at home possibly owed much to money troubles. He climbed up several storeys, arrived rather breathless but quite good-tempered at the fifth floor, where he rang a bell.

‘My dear, I’m delighted to see you, I was thinking about you only ten minutes ago.’

Madame Lebon welcomed Michaud in an attractive and rather vibrant voice, with a lilt in it that came from somewhere between the Danube and the Carpathians. She was a small woman of about thirty, with black eyes and black and faintly oily hair which hung down in stiff and shining tresses and gave her the aspect of a typical lady of Montparnasse, *anno* 1925. From the pocket of her voluminous fur coat, which enveloped her to the ankles, she produced a purse and extracted a cigarette-end from between a fold of the lining.

‘Why didn’t you come to see me on Thursday, Pierre Michaud? Some friends they came. I like if you know them. I am so glad to have you against me, Pierre.’

¹ On a day in December the beautiful young woman met, in a shop on the Champs-Elysees, an important official in the French Gestapo, who proposed sleeping with her. He was refused, whereupon he had her arrested and taken to a case-house, where he violated her, and stripped her of her jewels. After a fortnight, he handed her on to his subordinates, and after a month, had her killed. The corpse was thrown into the Seine, after being cut up into small pieces for convenience of transport.

These were not the simple words of politeness, as Michaud knew. Lina's feeling for him was one of trustful affection that appealed to him more than her anachronistic Montparnassian charm. As she puffed at her cigarette-end she asked him how his wife was getting on, referring to her as H  l  ne, though she had never met her. She scarified the French language with perfect complacency, using an abbreviated syntax all her own, and larding her vocabulary with the coarsest of slang, the effect of which was blunted by her foreign accent.

'Come into the drawing room, Pierre. No, don't say you're in a hurry, I am so furious if you don't stay.'

Despite the disorder in which Lina lived, the drawing room was a luxurious apartment. The tapestries on the walls were really valuable.

'What shall I do about the flat? Warschau, you think what? Put the flat in my name, and years pass and send me nothing more to pay. Where do I find money? Two quarters behind.'

'I will do my utmost to get you allowed more time, but I'm not on my own, and anyway, Lolivier and I are merely agents.'

'I know, Pierre. I see you to-day, it is the fourth time, and already so kind.'

'Why not sell part of the furniture? It's good stuff. Sell a quarter of it, even with three-quarters left Warschau won't have lost on the deal. Are you a Jew?'

'My mother a little, I say it just to you, and my father too, I think, a little. But I don't give a damn. I am Madame Lebon.'

'I just wanted to know how you stood in regard to Warschau. If you are a Jew . . .'

'You mean he won't give me trouble? I'm not sure. You people you think Jews they're always sweet for the Jews.'

Besides, I ought to tell you, already I have sold a little. Small things, oddments, forty thousand francs.'

'Quite right—sell some more.'

'And if I don't pay?'

Michaud waved a hand vaguely and would not commit himself. He could not tell Lina that M. Puget, the landlord, had sent an emissary to instruct him to take any opportunity of ejecting her from the flat. M. Puget seemed to be afraid that her Jewish origin, if brought to light, might involve him in complications, and moreover he considered that such a woman, being none too clean and rather eccentric, might depreciate his property. He was not anxious to quarrel with Warschau, and would have preferred the agents to settle the affair as though without his knowledge. Being himself in the Southern Zone he would be safely out of the way.

'And if I don't pay?' persisted Lina.

'You must. If you don't pay your rent you will be in for trouble, and I shan't be able to do much to help.'

Lina understood that he was alluding to some menace known only to himself.

'I give you money soon. You are right, Pierre, lost dog must expect blows.'

She burst into tears and hid her face in her small, dirty hands. He tried to comfort her, she poured out her anguish in a broken tone, and finally told him the tale of her tribulations. She was a distant relative of Warschau, who had extracted her from a Polish ghetto and housed her in one of his antique shops on the Faubourg St. Honoré. Having taken charge of her he had treated her roughly and terrorized her for her own good. The young Warschau cousins, now highly Parisian and fastidious, looked rather askance at this poor relation, still devoted to her religion, and redolent of the ancestral ghetto. They regarded her as a discredit to the family. In Jewish circles in Paris Lina did in fact feel less at

home than among Christians. Defying Warschau's wrath, she had married a painter called Lebon, who turned out sham eighteen-century stuff in the style of Greuze and Boucher for the antique dealer. Lina spoke with affection of this kind, good fellow—describing him as 'rather an old sod'—much addicted to pipes and practical jokes. For more than a year he had trailed her round the taverns of Montparnasse and then got himself run over by a lorry one day as he was coming out of the *Coupoie* ('his poor throat all torn out, pipe stem in his eye, shoved right in, I show you photo, I have in my bag'). Warschau had taken her in hand again, treating her with the same severity as before. He had set himself to train her in sound commercial traditions with a view to marrying her to a Jew, but on this last point he had come up against Lina's obstinacy; she did not like Paris Jews. He finally abandoned the project of marriage, considering that it would be better for her to be called Madame Lebon than Madame Levy or Jacobstein. Warschau foresaw war and he knew France would be defeated, regarding, as he did, her weakness with contempt. He always backed Germany, not only as a dispassionate observer but also—so Lina alleged—because he genuinely admired energy, hard work, and the will to conquer. He firmly believed that human justice is to be found in deeds done.

'He, I detest, so hard, never pity and yet I love and admire. He thinks so simple, he is so strong, always straight to the thing that is. The dirty doings of the French don't amuse him, I think not enough. There are nice ones all the same. Warschau, he says it's women, I believe he really likes me. He missed Poland and the real Jews from Poland. Sometimes, if I was alone with him, he talked Yiddish, and he looked kinder and happier. His wife, his children, they can't talk Yiddish, all so Parisian. Oh yes, Warschau missed the small, poor life, that warms like a good fire. But once

gone, never come back, even a Warschau. And if I could, I wouldn't, too Parisian now, weak in the my head, and thirty-two. The child never returns to the womb, but Warschau has forgotten. I remember, I think family and to-day I think sorrow. If you knew, Pierre, if you knew. . . .'

Lina then told Pierre in an undertone what she had lately heard from Poland. Jews murdered by the thousand, hanged, tortured, burned alive, or starved to death—it was a campaign of extermination, sparing neither women nor children.

'Now, Lina, you are tormenting yourself needlessly. These stories of systematic extermination are absurd. During the '14 war there were all sorts of tales of that kind. It was said that the Germans cut off children's hands, which was proved later on to be absolutely false. I needn't tell you what I feel about the Nazis, but I should regard myself as wanting in plain honesty if I believed a word of such reports. If the Nazis were savage beasts or sadistic maniacs they would have behaved as such in France as well as in Poland, and after all . . .'

'You must believe,' cried Lina, stamping on the floor : 'You must believe. But you French don't understand. You live like dolls and see everything small. When you hate it is in the head with reasons to explain. But with us, far away East, in the hard countries, we hate in the flesh, we care nothing for reasons, we want blood and death and pain. And the Germans, they want death of the Jews, and hear them cry, see them suffer, to have pleasure in their flesh. I can talk, being a woman, because hatred—I know all about it.'

Puckering her features into a grimace she stood erect in her voluminous cloak.

'In the end, God is for us and then—revenge. Death and tortures for the Germans, and their women, and their

children. With my hands I will strangle, I will tear eyes out. Revenge ! I also will have pleasure in my flesh. Revenge ! ’

Michaud waved his hands in desperation and alarm. He explained that hatred merely prolonged and intensified the trouble, it was neither right nor just, and every effort must be made to uproot it from human nature. This amused Lina ; she thought him sincere but quite absurd, and recovered her composure.

‘ A child you are, Pierre, so intelligent, but a child. ’

She felt in her purse for a non-existent cigarette-end. Michaud offered her one, which she hesitated to accept.

‘ It’s dear, and you are not rich. No, Pierre, you are not young, not rich, and as for getting out of a muck . . . ! That you’ll never learn how. I often think of you. I’m a woman alone, always fearing the Gestapo. Warschau fixed my identity papers but I’m fearing all the same. There are people just the same who know and could say. In the street I think of police-raids, I have a foreign accent and perhaps a foreign face too. Do you think I look Jewish ? Here is this flat too large for me, among all these things that cost so much, I feel lost, and I am not brave. When the evening falls I have a heart as tight as a fist, I hear Gestapo. Always Gestapo. For days there is a black hole in my thoughts. But if I see you, it is over. You bring back the world that was going. Beside Warschau, you are a poor man, a poor boob, and yet you are strong also in another way. Oh yes, another way. ’

Michaud felt only faintly gratified. She stubbed out his half-smoked cigarette in an ash-tray and slipped it, still smouldering, into her purse.

‘ Come and see me, Pierre, I need you so much. Or if you like I’ll come to you. I like to know Hélène and the children.

‘ Certainly, ’ said Michaud feebly, ‘ come when you like. At the moment, Hélène isn’t back from the clinic . . . ’

‘No, Pierre, I think I better not come. You fear your wife.’

‘Indeed I don’t,’ he protested, blushing up to the eyes. ‘Come when you like, Lina. I shall always be glad to see you.’

But the invitation lacked warmth : he went to inspect the repairs in the kitchen and bathroom and took his leave without renewing it. When he returned to the office it was later than he thought. Lolivier seemed to resent the fact, and did not speak. He tended to grudge any time spent elsewhere. Towards the end of the afternoon he looked up, observed that Michaud’s gaze was wandering, and said with intentional grossness :

‘So you’ve been having a tumble with that little Yid of yours.’

‘For God’s sake don’t be an idiot !’

‘Got turned down, did you ? Seriously, old boy, I think your Madame Lebon is a bit off. A last-war face, no tits, a big bottom, and second-rate legs. She has good eyes, but that’s about all. However, I suppose you think she’s ravishing.’

‘I don’t give a damn for her,’ said Michaud. ‘Besides, if I were unfaithful to my wife I should never get over it. I can’t help taking things seriously. But what an odd little creature she is ! Education, background, human dignity—none of that seems to cut any ice with her when she’s sizing up a person or a situation.’

‘A cynical type, in fact.’

‘Not in the least—the exact contrary. She’s not a bit cynical and she hasn’t even any irony. The thing that astonishes me in her is her gift for getting at the truth of a person without letting herself be led astray by his social position, his job, his family, the circumstances in which she met him—in fact, any of the elaborate trappings we generally take into account when we judge anyone. Incidentally, she

talked to me about you and I realized that after seeing you for just five minutes she knows you better than I do. I can imagine that people in prison—bankers, murderers, forgers, visionaries, all wearing the same uniform—must find themselves reduced in each other's eyes to just the same set of bare essentials that I seemed to be brought down to when I was talking to her.'

'That's just imagination—a woman and a man.'

'No. It really bothered me. While she was talking to me I felt that I was nothing but a poor fool living on a fanciful notion of things while she got through to the reality. I'd like to talk to you about that again some time. I haven't recovered enough yet to be able to get my ideas straight. Besides, I must be going. Antoine is off for a holiday on Saturday and I have to take him shopping. What a nuisance these kids are!'

As he got up Michaud noticed that Lolivier had grown pale and was looking at him with rather haggard eyes.

'What's the matter?'

'I'm worried. My son cleared out the evening before last, and he hadn't come back by midday to-day.'

'But what can have happened?'

'I don't know. I have a feeling that his mother's at the back of it, or at least that she knows where he is. It's always the same with her. She's quite unpredictable.'

FIVE

L^OLIVIER was not surprised to find his wife still in bed. Josy was sitting up and telephoning in her husky, drawling voice and grimacing occasionally into the receiver. Realizing that the conversation might be prolonged, he dropped into a chair.

'I assure you, darling, that I've been utterly taken in. Ketty ¹ is still keeping her end up at the *Européen*, but she's no catch at Bobino. Between ourselves she never was, and she's disgusting to the girls. I know what I'm talking about. In '29, at the Empire, it was she who kept my name off the bill. Georgius told me so. . . .'

With his chin in his hand, Lolivier eyed his wife's face, the typical face of a third-rate actress, harsh and raddled, propped against the pillow beneath a cluster of photographs pinned on to the wall. Mementoes of her thirty years of stage life; thirty years of music hall turns, of grinding hopes, of weary efforts, of wrath and envy, and recriminations against fate and theatrical managers; not to mention countless promiscuous love affairs, mostly from interested motives and always ineffectual. The photographs of her in the nude with feathers in her hair proved that she had been

¹ Ketty was the mistress of a German officer for a year. At the liberation she had her hair cropped and was arrested. Appearing before a commission of inquiry and asked why she had been the mistress of a German: "Because," she said, "he was a handsome chap and good in bed. You lot of sourpusses, you wouldn't be any good at all." I have this from a witness. During the whole occupation Lolivier's wife played with the idea of sleeping with a German officer, and never succeeded in doing so. Since the liberation, she is very forward in getting such actresses as did so banned from the stage.

quite pretty as a girl, graceful and good looking, but lacking the lithe figure, the perfect outline, or the vivacity of feature that catch and hold the eye of stage managers and woman-fanciers. The once pretty girl who, at the age of more than fifty, still clung to her professional ambitions, was now a hag, with the seven deadly sins, and others which the Church had perhaps not thought of, written on the folds and wrinkles of her face. Emaciated as she was, there were pouches of sagging flesh beneath the drawn skin, especially under the chin and at the two angles of the jaw. Her hips were fat, her legs and thighs were withered, but she had a protuberant stomach and heavy, pendulous breasts. Josy no longer resembled the portraits of her youth, except in a certain jauntiness, now aggressive from age and constant duplicity. Seated on his chair, Lolivier observed these changes and survivals with a sort of placid bitterness, like a convict accustomed to his condition and prepared to abandon hope.

‘I’m working on a wonderful act, a dumb-show act which will sweep the boards. I’ve told Couture about it. He thinks it’s terrific. He said—Darling, an idea like that is worth good money, I’ll take you on at once. So I said—My dear Bob, that’s very nice of you, but I have my artistic conscience, and I don’t stand for being hustled. We’ll have another word about it when my act is up to scratch. . . . Just a minute—hold on.’

Josy turned an inquiring chin towards her husband.

‘Hasn’t Tony come back yet?’ he asked.

‘Of course he has,’ she answered in a peevish tone. ‘He came back this morning. You’re not going to give him another dressing down? I should have thought that a boy of nineteen . . .’

Lolivier did not answer and walked out of the bedroom.

‘Forgive me, darling, it was my husband. More troubles. There’s no end to them with a man like him. If you knew, my poor Pépé, what it means for an artist to live with a really stupid man. There are times when . . .’

Having explored several rooms, Lolivier found his son in the kitchen. Seated on a corner of the table, with one foot on the ground and the other dangling, he threw a sly and nervous glance at his father and promptly looked away. Lolivier, with his back to the door, stood for a moment motionless to compose his features and resist an impulse of affection and joy at the recovery of this despised son whom he had so feared to lose. He surveyed him for a while. Tony had his father’s broad shoulders, with rather a small head, low forehead, and retreating chin, and deep-set eyes which quailed beneath a look. There was nothing about him that recalled his mother. He had none of her vulgarities, neither in his expression nor his voice. His rather disquieting face suggested a mask moulded on to a cumbrous and amorphous consciousness, but strangely inexpressive, without other sign of inner life than the dark gleams that sometimes flickered in his sullen eyes. Blinded by his affection, the father had never perceived the slightest anomaly in this degenerate visage and had long cherished the hope that his son’s conduct and character would in the end conform to what was quite an attractive appearance.

‘Where have you been these last three days?’ he asked quietly.

‘With a friend at Vincennes. I tried several times to telephone to your office but the number was always engaged.’

‘That’s a lie. When you went out on Monday evening at ten o’clock you took five hundred francs from my notecase. You didn’t need all that to go and stay with a friend.’

Tony bent his head in token of admission and to spare himself a reply. His father did not press him further, he

paused for a moment before launching into his tirade, and lifted the cover of the saucepan which the servant, before her departure, had set on the gas stove for the midday meal. A rich odour of cabbage and offal rose up into the steam, and he observed a whiteish sausage bubbling on a bed of vegetables.

‘You will soon be nineteen, you do no work, and you won’t work. I am not speaking of your studies. Your masters, kind as many of them were, long since gave up all hope of you. You can’t even spell decently. But that’s not the worst. For three years you have lived in idleness, you spend your time running after girls and drinking in cafés. And what girls—what cafés! The result was—syphilis at seventeen. Your mother was weak enough to give you money for your amusements, but the little she could let you have wasn’t enough. You began to steal from your parents, and when you couldn’t find any money to steal, you sold our linen, table cloths, anything in the house that could be converted into money. I merely thrashed you when you did so, always hoping that your abominable conduct was a passing phase, and that your taste for music would be your salvation.’

Tony looked up, his expression softened, and a fleeting shadow of regret passed across his face. He had a flair for music and he played the piano with a touch and style which his teachers were agreed showed great promise. His musical studies, the only ones he had ever taken seriously, had been gradually abandoned. For the past year he had played without a teacher, merely for amusement. Lolivier thought he saw a sign that he had touched a sensitive cord. In order to let the feeling germinate, he said nothing for a while, and took a few turns round the kitchen. With his nose to the window pane he watched the passers-by in the Rue Ramey, and pictured himself, a hunched and hurrying figure

stumping along one of the daily furrows of his existence, exhaling a waft of anxiety into the moist air of an April noon. The vision of that lumbering silhouette bowed beneath the burden of his cares, so solitary among the throng of pedestrians, made him sigh. He turned towards his son and said gently :

‘ My poor boy, you will find all this out for yourself one day, but I wish you knew it now. Life being what it is . . . ’

Tony had not moved. His father gave a start of surprise and apprehension as he noticed a canary’s cage on the table. Tony had hidden it behind his back when his father came into the kitchen, and had now forgotten it. Crouching in the bottom of the cage a white mouse was thrusting its little white snout between the bars and peering round the room with soft pink eyes. The sight of the animal instantly awakened two memories in Lolivier’s mind. One, the more recent, related to an apparently trivial object : when he had lifted the lid of the saucepan a few moments before, his eyes had registered the presence of a bit of polished wood lying on the gas stove beside the saucepan, the shape of which seemed to suggest the handle of an implement. The other reverted to a pheasant which a countryman had left at the house at the beginning of the previous autumn. Having offered to draw it, Tony had made a point of plucking it alive and had burnt its eyes out with a hot iron. Lolivier reached out an arm to the stove and picked up the handle of the bradawl, the steel shaft of which lay under the saucepan. The point of the implement was now glowing in the gas flame. Tony looked over his shoulder with a glitter in his eyes and his lips drawn back in a ghastly grin. Lolivier grew pale and eyed the monster with more wrath than horror, for it had never entered his head that his son could be a degenerate, and in his eyes the boy’s responsibility was absolute. Flinging the tool on to the floor he gripped Tony

by the collar and the hair, thrust him against the wall, and there held him for a moment.

‘You filthy beast! Don’t you remember what I said? You swore never to do such a thing again! That poor innocent little creature!’

He bashed the boy’s head against the wall. Tony yelled so loudly that, as he had foreseen, his father let him go, whereupon he promptly fled. Lolivier heard his footsteps clatter along the hall, then the front door opened and slammed, just as the mother began to scream from her bedroom. Quivering all over, he sat down on a chair and took the cage on his knees. Frightened at first, the white mouse turned towards him, and with its forefeet against the bars eyed him with touching trustfulness. In the face of the little animal’s gentleness and innocence, his son’s cruelty seemed to him more baffling than ever—a sort of sinister mystery. For the first time the thought occurred to him that Tony might not be wholly responsible for his acts, but instead of ascribing them to some physiological taint he had a vague idea of some malevolent power that had crushed the boy’s will. Indifferent to religion and metaphysical concepts, he suddenly seemed to discern a principle of evil, a sort of conscious cancer, with purposes and methods of its own, deliberately and insidiously infecting individuals, as well as ideas and institutions. He soon wearied of these reflections, picked up the cage and cautiously lifted it to the level of his face. The white mouse recoiled to the centre of its prison, but looked at him with a gentle, placid air. The animal’s feet and tail still inspired him with a repulsion that presently gave way to a feeling of protective tenderness. He slipped the tip of his little finger between the bars and the mouse, in three or four little hops, came and rubbed his nose against it. He was smiling affectionately at the creature when his wife, in a dressing-gown and bedroom slippers, dashed into the

kitchen in a way that presaged trouble. Lolivier braced himself to keep calm.

‘What have you been doing to the boy now, to make him run out like that and slam the door?’ she asked menacingly.

‘I banged his head against the wall. When I came in he was just going to burn out this little creature’s eyes.’

‘You don’t mean to tell me that you knocked him about just because of a mouse?’

‘Yes,’ replied Lolivier, with a touch of despondent irony.

‘Yes, just because of a mouse.’

Josy grasped his meaning. She could not endure irony from a man whom she had always regarded as so utterly her inferior.

‘I realized long ago what you are up to,’ she retorted.

‘Mice indeed!—it’s always the same thing. The truth is that you detest Tony and myself for being artists. You can’t bear to think that you’re just a shoddy little shyster in a third-rate office, and not much good even at that, and you have to get your own back somehow.’

‘Strictly speaking, I might be jealous of Tony and envy him his musical gifts, but I’m afraid he’ll throw them away. As for yourself, what have I got to be jealous of? If you could inspire any sort of feeling, it would be pity, but I’m long past that.’

‘Oh stop it—you just make me laugh! A coarse brute like you couldn’t begin to understand an artistic nature like mine.’

‘My opinion of your artistic nature was formed long ago, and it is shared by the music-hall managers.’

Lolivier had touched her on the raw. His wife’s face crimsoned, the pockets and folds of sagging flesh seemed to swell with venom. She took a step forward, thrust her face into his, and snarled in an affected drawl that still recalled the stage.

‘You can keep your opinions to yourself. I’m not interested in what a dirty little clerk may think, I have thirty years of stage career behind me, and my friends are Maurice Chevalier, Josephine Baker, Georgius, Damia ; and yours are counter-jumpers and small tradesmen. You can put your opinions in your pocket. My friends and I have our own ideas. We know what we’re about, and don’t worry ourselves about riff-raff like you. And there’s something else. . . .’

On this familiar topic, in which her vanity found full scope, Josy was inexhaustible, and her very words kept her anger ablaze. Lolivier now scarcely listened. As he surveyed his wife’s face he wondered if he had indeed been right in explaining moral depravity by the will of a demoniac power. In this case, the vileness of the feelings expressed was so exactly mirrored in the person of the speaker that they seemed to be its natural consequence.

‘You are becoming so ugly,’ he said, ‘that your face repels me. I can see your vices swarming in it like vermin on a dung hill.’

Josy’s stupefaction was such that it was several seconds before she could think of a retort. He was himself dumb-founded at his outburst. Hitherto, a certain respect for humanity, even as embodied in his wife, had restrained him from a too brutal candour. This had vanished, leaving no sense of embarrassment. Indeed, having spoken, he felt he could breathe more freely. He waved his wife aside and concentrated his attention on the white mouse, which seemed to have taken a liking to him. Josy shouted—‘Brute !’, grabbed the cage with both hands, and tried to wrench it out of his grasp.

‘That cage isn’t yours,’ she said. ‘It’s Tony’s.’

‘Let it go !’ said Lolivier grimly.

She did not catch the menace in his voice. As she

redoubled her efforts to get hold of the cage a blow on the jaw made her drop it and sent her reeling against the sink. He set the cage on the table and returning to his wife struck her again and knocked her down. Josy, now lay prostrate, bleeding from the nose and shrieking. Her dressing gown was wide open and the pink nightdress exposed the withered body with its protuberances of flaccid flesh. Her face, now flecked with the blood that was oozing from her nose, contracted in a grimace of rage and pain. He kicked her until her shrieks dwindled into whimpers. Then he returned to the white mouse, whistled softly on two notes, and tapped his fingers on the bars. The animal seemed to accept his advances with new eagerness and an air of gratitude. Although now accustomed to the little creature, its paws and tail still faintly repelled him and the notion of touching them sent a quiver over his skin. None the less, he braced himself to open the door of the cage and slip his hand inside. The white mouse recoiled slightly but did not appear alarmed. His heart throbbing, Lolivier cautiously advanced his hand. Mastering his agitation he finally touched the head and back of the little creature, which allowed him to stroke it with his finger. Josy's lamentations had ceased. He turned, and saw her crawling towards the pointed tool which had so nearly served as an instrument of torture. Closing the cage again he launched a kick at her ribs, which produced another shriek, and replaced the bradawl in the kitchen-table drawer.

'Etienne,' she said in broken tones. 'I'm dying: I forgive you.'

By way of response, Lolivier gripped her by one arm, dragged her to her feet, and pushed her in front of him into the bedroom. Before getting into bed, she was seized with an access of emotion and flung her arms round his neck.

'Etienne, darling, this is dreadful. We have been married

for twenty years and you have never raised a hand to your little wife before.'

He flung her back and helped her into bed. Perturbed by his silence she several times called him 'Dear' and 'Darling' in a voice of honey, still quivering with wrath and murderous hate; but he made no reply.

Although he had gulped down his lunch Lolivier arrived late at his office, having spent some time playing with the mouse. Michaud was already at his writing table. In the other room Solange was typing, while slyly watching Eusèbe's eyes. For a few days past the youth had been manifesting a timid interest in the typist's legs and had taken to gazing at them surreptitiously. The fear of being caught sometimes injected a little blood into his hollow, livid cheeks. Solange, who took a high delight in awakening this furtive curiosity, did everything she could to stimulate it, and calculate the angles most favourable to Eusèbe's vision, meditating an outburst of indignation when the boy's agitation became flagrant. Several times a day she happened to drop her pencil at her feet but he had not yet been sufficiently intelligent to come and pick it up.

Solange was struck by the change in Lolivier's physiognomy. It was something more than the reflection of a passing preoccupation, but otherwise it baffled her. She was equally curious to know what was contained in the large package which he was carrying so gingerly, but he did not say.

'Monsieur Lolivier, your son has just been here'

'What did he want?'

'But you sent him yourself to fetch a paper you had left on your office table.'

'All right: but if he turns up here again when I'm out, don't let him in on any pretext.'

Leaving Solange unsatisfied, Lolivier went into the next

room. Michaud had just been rung up by a tenant with the complaint that his neighbour on the floor above had a large and noisy party every night and danced until five in the morning. The complainant had gone on to express his indignation at such indecent conduct, which was in fact an insult to France in her distress, and he had enlarged on the point in a sanctimonious snarl that left a very disagreeable impression on Michaud. Lolivier, having deposited his package on a chair, took a bunch of keys out of a drawer in his table and opened another which was double-locked.

‘Exactly as I thought,’ he said, after examining the contents. ‘Tony has been here in my absence and cleared the till. Fortunately there was only twelve hundred francs.’

‘Are you sure?’ asked Michaud, to bridge an awkward pause.

‘I don’t know whether you have ever been into a dog shop. For my part I know nothing so pleasant and so soothing to the mind. It is not only delightful to see the puppies tumbling about in their cages, to stroke a paw and a nose or two, but it’s delightful to watch the people as they look at them. Their faces are so serene, their eyes so kind and bright and smiling. For a moment wickedness is banished from the world and one feels a better man oneself. Well, seven or eight years ago, the year of his first communion, I was in a dog shop with the boy in the Opera district. We both stopped to look at a litter of puppies about a month or two old. They were playing in their cage with a gaiety that was quite entrancing. I laughed to see them roll and yap and snap, or stop playing to come and talk to us. At the same time I watched Tony for the pleasure of seeing his enjoyment of it all. But he did not laugh. He stood with a gloomy look upon his face. Then, as I bent over the cage to stroke the dogs he did the same and began to laugh and play with them, until I grabbed his arm and dragged him

out of the shop. I had just noticed that he was pricking the poor creatures with a pin.'

Lolivier spoke quite calmly, with an air almost of detachment, as though he were talking about someone else's son and not his own.

'Last year,' he continued, 'I caught him burning a pheasant's eyes out after plucking it alive. And last of all, when I got home just now, he was about to burn out the eyes of a white mouse. Well now, you know Tony, you have often seen him and talked to him. After what I have told you, what do you think about him?'

'My dear fellow, what can I say? I feel rather at a loss.'

Michaud thought of his three charming children, sane in body and in mind, and felt the embarrassment of a rich and happy man when some poor devil asks his opinion on the awful life we are condemned to live.

'You are afraid of hurting my feelings,' said Lolivier.

'Not at all, I assure you. But, for the matter of that, there is nothing alarming in what you have told me about Tony. All individuals possess these dangerous instincts, which they can generally control, but which physiological accidents may unconsciously aggravate into abnormality.'

'In fact, you think he is not responsible?'

Michaud was very ready to consider the problem of responsibility. He compared man to a saucepan, a choirboy, a flat iron, a lamp, an automobile engine, and his moral equilibrium to that of a cyclist. It was the cyclist metaphor that gave him most satisfaction. When the bicycle is in good condition, he said, the cyclist has no excuse for knocking down old men, or running over fowls. But when the handlebars don't respond, when the tyres are flat, when the brakes are defective. . . . On the other hand, the cyclist, or, if he is too young, his parents must keep the bicycle in order.

'It may happen too that the cyclist is vicious, and that he

enjoys knocking old men down,' observed Lolivier. 'In fact, that is what most often happens, and what explains war, air raids, black market, firing squads, crime, poverty, wealth, law, vile women, burnt eyes, and degrading toil. Bicycles are good things but cyclists are vicious, they think of nothing but running over people or knocking them into the ditch. Those of us who don't want to run over people or to be run over have only to avoid cyclists, keep off the highways, and take the by-paths.'

Lolivier got up and went to the chair on which he had put his package. Very carefully he unfolded the paper from the white mouse's cage.

'You haven't really understood my analogy,' said Michaud. 'Anyway, you should have Tony examined by a specialist.'

'What kind of a specialist?'

Michaud did not dare mention a psychiatrist. However, Lolivier did not wait for his reply. Bending down over the chair he crumbled a bit of bread for the white mouse. She ate it voraciously, trotting from crumb to crumb without lifting her head, crunching the food in her delicate little snout with a sort of mincing elegance and grace that was quite irresistible. When the meal was over he felt he had taken a step forward in the little creature's regard and began to play with her.

'Hallo ! Monsieur Legrand. Michaud here—the agent to your flats. Monsieur Legrand, I have just been rung up by one of your neighbours who complains that you make a noise at nights until five in the morning.'

'That is perfectly true,' said Legrand in a youthful, vibrant voice which greatly appealed to Michaud. 'We spent last night singing and dancing.'

'That is exactly what your neighbour complains of. It has upset his sleep and his dignity as a Frenchman. It is not for

me, of course, to take account of the latter point. My part as agent of the property consists in assuring to our tenants the peaceful enjoyment of their homes. So you must not be surprised if I ask you to moderate your celebrations henceforward.'

'Impossible, my dear sir! I have just married the most marvellous woman, and I am wildly in love with her. And Clementine adores gaiety, noise, dancing, music, champagne, and parties. As for myself, my dear sir, I am quite out of control, I turn night into day, I believe in God, I believe in Clementine, I believe in everything, I dance, I shout, I sing, I laugh, I am grateful, I am in love.'

'I congratulate you, but the tenants . . .'

'Ah yes, the tenants, they are furious, of course. And well they may be! Poor people, how I wish I could make myself see reason, think of France, the prisoners-of-war, and so on . . . but I can't. I belong to Clementine and to love. In vain do I strive to dwell on all these things, but France, Europe, the war, and all the miseries of the world, seem to me of as little moment as a grain of salt in the Atlantic. Love sweeps everything away, there's no room for anything but love. I love Clementine! I adore Clementine! Forgive me for proclaiming my joy like this but if only you knew her. . . . Come and see us this evening. There will be dancing . . .'

'Very kind of you, but I don't think I should be quite up to your mark. You must dance without me, and above all dance without waking up your neighbours.'

'I'll try . . . Oh, your lovely mouth, your eyes, your breasts, your . . . Excuse me, I was talking to Clementine. Yes, I promise you . . . Little pigeon in a blue, blue sky . . .'

Michaud, feeling a little dazed, hung up the receiver. He sat for a moment with his elbows resting on the table and his chin in his hands dreaming of storms of roses, bursting forth in streets and offices, towns and countryside, in the

Frances and the Europes of the world. Lolivier had sat down again in his place opposite and set to work, Michaud eyed his partner's broad, pink cranium, dotted with downy tufts of hair, and pursued the thread of his own thoughts.

'Is your wife all right?' asked Lolivier, who felt his friend's eyes on his bald pate.

'I have just been talking to such an odd tenant.'

Michaud related the conversation, rather exaggerating Legrand's delirium in order to get the story under his partner's skin, as he always thought him a little obtuse.

'... He was in a sort of beatific ecstasy, and he managed to project Clementine's thighs on to my blotting paper. I like gaiety, even in other people, and I am not in the least shocked by Legrand's transports,¹ but I find myself wondering if one can live surrounded by distress and disaster without taking one's part in them, and even whether it is altogether decent to indulge in a pæan of joy to the accompaniment of lamentations and gnashings of teeth.'

'You are getting stupid and hypocritical. You, like everyone else, try to forget the miseries of the time. You go about looking for your particular form of jazz but you haven't the gumption of a man like Legrand, and worse still, you want to be respected by your next door neighbour. The result is deplorable. You get peevish and depressed and at the same time you get a good deal of satisfaction out of attributing your state of mind to the state of the world.'

'You're talking nonsense because you can't imagine that other people can feel what you don't. I really suffer from our defeat. I feel the sufferings of our country and the sufferings

¹ Legrand's happiness lasted until the end of the occupation. In August, 1944, after the departure of the Germans, his vindictive neighbour denounced him as having invited collaborators to his parties, and stated that the guests were in the habit of singing "Lily Marlene". Legrand was interned at Drancy, where he remained for eight months. Clementine grew tired of waiting for him, and followed a young Colonel in the Resistance to Marseilles.

still in store. I suffer, too, for everything that is now abased—love, liberty, the human spirit.’

‘You’re lying, you old devil. You have a number of small worries—the black-out, no taxis, no coal, and the general complications of life. You’re certainly depressed, you get the most frightful attacks of gloom—but you were just the same before the war. You can’t stand the German officers, but you couldn’t stand French officers either. I knew you at the time when the name of Poincaré was as odious to you as Hitler’s is to-day. I haven’t yet heard you talk of the Oppressor with the anger and bitterness that used almost to choke you when you mentioned Clericalists and Communists. You suffer on the prisoners’ account, but it’s now more than four months since your old friend Rougemain wrote to you from his *Oflag* in Saxony, and you haven’t yet found time to reply. You suffer owing to the enslavement of the human mind and liberty, forgetting the time when you used to lament the condition of servitude and jobbery to which the money-power had reduced the French nation. In supplying new targets for your fits of ill-temper or melancholy, defeat and the invader provide the diversions needed to maintain your balance.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Michaud, ‘that is all perfectly true. In the face of so many bankruptcies and disasters and so much misery I am only faintly moved, I can do nothing but recoil into the recesses of my own petty sensibility. When I say I suffer on the prisoners’ account I am not speaking the truth. I think of them for five minutes a day at most, and subject myself to a faint feeling of melancholy which is, in fact, not unpleasant because it helps me to preserve my self-respect. And most people are like me. Their reason informs them more or less of the extent of the catastrophe, but their heart cannot contain it. Apart from the fact that life is with us all the time, pushing us on. And life is solely rooted in

the person living it, even when its offshoots are luxuriant. So what you say is true. My sufferings are a fiction and may be summarized as a few impulses of ill-temper, a few melancholy moments which would undoubtedly have been induced by far less tragic happenings. None the less, this fiction does testify to a serious and comprehensive act of choice and may suffice to pledge me definitely. There are people who suffer no more than I do from our calamities, and yet sufficiently for them to feel obliged to risk their lives.'

'Men are capable of dying for trifles. They may also risk their lives for some quite insignificant point which happens to appeal to their intelligence or sentiment in a cause that is really beyond their grasp. That is what mostly happens, and the risk run adds nothing, qualitatively speaking, to the lie they tell themselves.'

Michaud was about to protest, but Lolivier, announcing that he had heard and talked enough bosh for the time being, proceeded to crumble some more bread for the white mouse.

ANTOINE pretended to be very busy so as to avoid his parents' company and their inquiring eyes. He had the feeling that he was going to do something wrong, and was doubtful whether he would enjoy it. At the very moment of departure the idea of spending ten days with Yvette seemed to him rather absurd. Without positively hoping for some last-minute obstacle he would have been relieved to have had to abandon his project. Sometimes, too, as he thought of what this day and night-long intimacy with a woman would be like, a surge of affection dispelled his uneasiness. His sister Pierrette did her utmost to make herself useful, only too successfully. Scarcely had he begun to look for a book or a safety-pin than she produced them at once, so much so that he was ready more than an hour before his time, and no longer having the slightest pretext for dashing about the flat, had to sit down in his parents' bedroom.

Michaud was installed in an armchair beside his wife who had come back from the clinic that morning. The operation had been successful, but she was to stay in bed for another week. Antoine, indeed, was very conscience-stricken at abandoning his mother just when she might need his company, which was usually such a help and solace. Beneath the gaze of the reunited family he made an effort to appear calm, but his movements were restless, his voice rang a little false, and his eyes were unnaturally bright. Hélène did not fail to notice her son's nervousness, which she ascribed to the excitement of departure. She did, however,

observe an embarrassment in his manner which could not be altogether explained by impatience or agitation. It occurred to her that some girl-cousin of Tiercelin's might be going on the trip to Burgundy, but this, however, did not cause her much alarm.

'You ought to have called on Tiercelin's father,' she said to Michaud. 'That was the least you could do.'

'I'll look in one evening this week. I even thought we might invite him to dinner one day.'

'I don't think he goes out much,' said Antoine, 'it is difficult for him to leave his restaurant.'

Knowing what manner of man M. Tiercelin was, the notion of his dining with his parents upset and even shocked him.

'Perhaps it would do if we invited Paul here after the holidays,' suggested Pierrette, sensing her brother's embarrassment.

Antoine threw her a glance of affectionate gratitude. Pierrette had no suspicion of the truth, but inclined to believe that the loved one was to be on the trip. In view of Antoine's attractions she did not see how it could be otherwise. At school many of her friends were in love with him, and one of them, Clémence Robichon,¹ had written a Heredian sonnet in which Antoine Michaud figured as Mark Antony and met an easily recognizable Cleopatra at Dupont's on the Place Clichy. Frédéric, who had caught snatches of a conversation between his brother and Tiercelin on the day

¹ In 1943, Clémence Robichon, at the age of 14, fell in love with a German soldier, aged 42, who was billeted not far away from her home, in a hotel in the Rue Caulaincourt, requisitioned by the Occupation Forces. He was a coarse-looking man, with an imbecile face. Clémence was so taken by him that she stopped him one evening in the street to ask the time, but he was never destined to know the passion he had inspired. When he left Paris, she meditated suicide, then she fell in love successively with a priest, a militiaman, a café-proprietor, and a bookseller, to be finally seduced by an American negro in February, 1945. At present engaged to a magistrate's son.

before, scented a rather more full-blooded adventure, but was still behind the truth. Michaud, for his part, suspected nothing. Antoine's agitation completely escaped his notice. As always, he had a difficulty in fixing his attention on the plane of domestic problems. He began to talk about holidays in general, and then enlarged on the part played by summer holidays in the initiation of wars. He wondered whether the abrupt suspension of the exertions made by vast communities during a whole year, a breach of vital habits, did not tend to engender collective psychoses. This sort of speculation annoyed Hélène Michaud. She always had the impression that her husband allowed his gaze to stray far beyond the family and indeed that he forgot its existence.

'In any case,' said she, 'I don't see what one could invent to take the place of holidays.'

'True. I even wonder if children get enough holidays. I was talking to Lolivier about it the other day and he thought it disgraceful that the holiday system should be the same for a child of eight as for a lad of eighteen. I rather think he is right. By the way, I haven't told you yet, poor Lolivier is in great distress. I felt quite worried about him this evening. Just imagine, his son, who is under eighteen, left home the day before yesterday for the second time and hasn't come back yet. You can imagine how anxious he is.'

'He must have been arrested by the Germans.'

'No, that is not what Lolivier is afraid of. From what I can understand, the boy frequented some pretty low haunts and is indeed an unpleasant youth. In fact, I had the impression that Lolivier wasn't telling me the whole truth, as though he were ashamed of it.'

'How frightful ! The boy doesn't look as though he had a bad nature. He is polite and reserved and, I fancy, rather shy.'

'I never could stand him,' declared Frederic, 'and nobody

at school could either. When he got himself expelled I think everybody was pleased. He hadn't got a single pal.'

'Lolivier was telling me just now that his mother had done him a great deal of harm. She is a woman without any moral sense at all. One can't even say that she was weak-minded about him. There is a veritable conspiracy between her and the son. Lolivier is pretty sure she knows where he is. In any case, she doesn't appear to be worrying about him at all. However, there can be little doubt that he has gone off with some girl.'

'It's incredible,' sighed Hélène, 'to think of the poor child coming to grief, and through his mother's fault.'

Antoine felt himself grow pale, and did not know where to look. It was as though his own escapade was being discussed. As a matter of fact, the young Lolivier's adventure, though he was regarded by normal persons with pity and disgust, was less reprehensible than his own. He, at least, had not abused his parents' confidence. He had, moreover, the excuse of a depraved mother, who gave way to him. Antoine, on the contrary, had had none but the best of teaching from his family, and not from those who discredit morality by an aggressive, pompous, or pharisaical conception of it; he had had before him the silent examples embodied in the daily life of the household, its talk and atmosphere. His mother, he thought, might well have died of shock if she had learnt the truth. The mere thought of Lolivier's troubles had cast a shadow on her face. Antoine began to wonder whether he wasn't a monster, an unnatural son, devoid of heart or conscience.

'For boys of that age,' said Michaud, 'there is nothing more dangerous than these excursions outside the bounds of normal life. In giving way to their caprices they lose the taste for discipline and effort, they fall into the habit of letting themselves slide down the easy slopes of life and get

nowhere. I am not referring to the demoralizing company that teaches a boy to take life lightly. Young Lolivier knows all about that already.'

These words, uttered without any edifying purpose, awakened a painful echo in Antoine's heart. For his part, he subscribed to them almost without reserve. The facts were, after all, indisputable. Since his affair with Yvette he had done little good at school. He had no time to do any serious work, and when by chance he had, he could not concentrate. Perhaps he would fail in the certificate, and indeed he looked like doing so. He caught his father's eye, and hurriedly peered at his watch.

'Yes, time is getting on,' said his mother. 'You mustn't be late, darling. Pierre, you must give him some money.'

For the past week Antoine had been dreading this moment when, for appearances' sake, he would have to accept from his parents money which he did not need, and which very likely they could ill spare. His father drew his notecase slowly out of his pocket and his face grew grave.

'Well now, how much will you need?'

'Apart from the journey I shall have no expenses. And I rather think that Tiercelin's father will be driving us back in his car.'

In the course of previous talks on the subject Antoine had mentioned the prospect of coming back by car, but his father had paid no attention. Now that he had his notecase in his hand, the word struck him disagreeably. He admitted the existence of cars as an element in economic life, or as a typical embodiment of modern civilization, but as actual objects and belonging to individuals, they inspired him with the sense of distrust he commonly reserved for manifestations of superfluous wealth and social inequality.

'I'm glad you're getting a holiday,' he said, 'but I'm rather afraid you may find yourself in an environment in

which money is no object. How does this Monsieur Tiercelin manage to run a car under present conditions ?'

'It's a gazogene car,' replied Antoine with a blush.

Michaud knew little about such matters, but the word suggested to his mind some sort of cheap and inconvenient substitute, which reassured him.

'Ah well, a gazogene car is another matter.'

'A gazogene apparatus costs a great deal to instal,' observed Frederic.

He bit his tongue as he saw the suspicion come back into his father's face.

'I think you might give Antoine a thousand francs,' said Hélène.

'I shan't spend half that,' said Antoine emphatically. 'Five hundred francs is actually more than I shall need.'

'Still, it's better to have some money in your pocket. One never knows what may happen. Give him a thousand francs.'

Michaud opened his notecase and drew out a thin wad of notes. Hélène and her children silently followed his every movement. Their faces wore the look of gloom and apprehension always induced by money problems in the family circle. Michaud laid the packet on his knee, and everyone could see that it contained six thousand-franc notes. Then all eyes were averted, as though confronted with the spectacle of their father's nudity. For Antoine this was the cruellest moment of the evening. Despite himself, his eyes returned to the six thousand-franc notes and counted them again. He remembered the last money he had given to Yvette, a rather bulkier handful than this, and how she had stuffed the notes nonchalantly into her bag without taking the trouble to count them. And during the ten days when they would be going about together they would very likely leave in the bars and cabarets of Montmartre more money

than was needed to keep the family for a month. With a deliberation that he found quite agonizing, his father detached one note from the packet and gave it him. Again he wanted to refuse so large a sum, but his throat was constricted, and he could not speak.

'I don't need to urge you to be economical,' said Michaud. 'You know how difficult life is these days. Don't ever be drawn into useless expense without thinking of the necessities it represents. I don't want to criticise people who make money easily. Luck sometimes wears an honest countenance. But I do warn you against the temptation to think that money quickly made and quickly spent can have the same value as ours.'

Antoine, looking distraught and shamefaced, took the thousand-franc note and put it in his case. The sight of that empty notecase of cheap imitation leather touched Michaud. He feared he had been rather pompous, and added with a smile :

'Make the most of your holiday, and have a good time, my boy.'

These kindly words pierced Antoine's heart. He at once resolved to give up his stay with Yvette. He would come back home and say that some bad news had obliged Tiercelin to give up the holiday in Burgundy. He was already thinking of the expression he should assume, when the hum of an engine abruptly changed his mind.

'That's an aeroplane,' said Frederic.

'It's a German plane,' said Antoine quickly.

He was seized with panic as he reflected that his mother would not let him leave the house during an alert. A sudden eagerness to be with Yvette and away from his own people now possessed his mind. He recklessly hurried through his good-byes, giving his mother a scamped and unaffectionate kiss. In her surprise she threw him an anxious glance which

he barely noticed. Pierrette and Frederic offered to accompany him to Tiercelin's place, but he declined in a tone of irritation, without even a word of thanks. In his haste to be free and to forget his family he found all refusals easy.

Yvette opened the door and could hardly conceal her disappointment and annoyance as she recognized Malinier. Once a month he made it his duty to call on the wife of his colleague Grandmaison, who had for three years been his next door neighbour in the Belle Etoile Assurance Co., and was now in a Stalag in Brandenburg. She disliked his habit of appearing in her life like a statue of the Commander, all the more so as he was uncouth, ill-dressed, too obviously hard up, and rather effusive. She was even a little afraid of the man. Conversation with him was hardly possible. For most of the time he talked and talked with a sort of dismal violence, and his fevered eyes and raucous voice suggested the raving of a visionary monk. The misfortunes of France were always present to his mind. He felt them in his heart and in his flesh, he suffered like a mother watching the death-agony of her child.

'I have just left the office,' he said, following Yvette into the chromium boudoir. 'I meant to walk home, but it began to rain. The underground was packed. Think of the days when we could just get on to a bus. If only that were all!'

He took a chair and put his hat on the floor, and sat down, surrounded by her mirrors, her chromium-plating, her velvet-seated chairs, the whole costly interior of which every item was an indictment. Yvette did not feel very comfortable: but Malinier, insensible to such matters, noticed nothing.

'Is Elizabeth well?' she asked.

'So-so. She always talks of coming to see you, but what

with children, food, queues and coupons, she never gets a moment. Not to mention little affairs of the heart. People who can still think of such things, in times like these, are lucky, aren't they? Personally . . . You aren't unfaithful to Grandmaison, are you? It wouldn't be right, my dear, not right at all. Not dignified, and not French. Oh yes, it's hard, I know—I've been young myself. It runs through the head, and under the skin. And don't you suppose the poor prisoners feel it too? Far from home, nothing to do but work till they drop, and then think about our defeat.'

Realizing that he was getting on to his usual themes, Yvette tried to divert him by talking about his children. But Malinier was no longer listening. A dark fire began to smoulder in his eyes, a gloomy savagery seamed his hard and haggard face, and brought out the furrows of anguish on his forehead.

'Defeated, by God! To think that we—that France, should have come to such a pass! I can't believe it. When I think of France, alas, I see it at the time when I was a boy at school, and used to draw it in my atlas. France—with her delicate little curves, her roguish face looking out over the sea, rivers blue as a girl's veins, provinces and towns, and railroads thrilling all over her like nerves. And yet, sound and solid, make no mistake about that. Alsace-Lorraine, too, on her back like a soldier's knapsack. Alsace-Lorraine, when I was a boy, was beyond the dotted line. The brutes had taken it. But I used to say—just wait!'

Malinier grinned and began to chant in an undertone:

'You shall not have Alsace nor Lorraine,

In spite of all we shall still be French. . . .'

At this Chou appeared, and trotted up to him with admiration in her eyes. Her mother caught and kissed her to conceal the laugh that she could no longer stifle. But Malinier noticed nothing. His voice quavered with

emotion, and he paused for a moment to recover himself and swallow his saliva. Yvette, still sheltered behind her child, asked in rather a diffident tone :—

‘Does Elizabeth manage to get enough food for the family?’

‘Incredible! To think that they’re at Strasbourg, and at Rennes, Orléans, Poitiers, Bayonne. Sometimes I say to myself, Malinier, you’re dreaming. I touch my scars. The one on my shoulder is Nomény: on my left side, Les Épargés; on my backside, Hill 304, eleven shell-splinters. Two toes left at Craonne, plus a bit of scrap-iron in the belly. I don’t say that because I have anything to complain of or regret. Some fellows who were in the last war will tell you that we were fed up, and only fought because we had to. Absolute rot. We wanted to fight, we were all for it. When three-quarters of my section were knocked out in a struggle for a few feet of ground, I never thought we had paid too dear for it. A yard of France is worth anything you like. In November ’18 at Metz . . . But no—why think of all that? And now—here they are. Right among us, on our pavements, all over Paris, and looking as if they belonged here. When I see them in their uniforms, my wounds begin to smart. It’s all too ghastly. I, Malinier, Lieutenant of Reserve, military medal, five mentions in despatches, have to walk down the Avenue de l’Opéra making way for the sort of sods I used to kick into the gutter at Mainz. And then people talk to me about religion. God, indeed! there’s no God hereabouts, any more than there’s butter in the market. I sometimes wonder if I’m going barmy. I toss about in bed at night, thinking—thinking all the time. Last night I imagined I was fixing up an apparatus something like a radio station, with knobs and levers. I set the needle at two thousand, and two thousand Fritzes went pop without knowing how. In one day I had

wiped out the entire army of occupation. I hardly have the heart to laugh these days, but when I thought of their officers' faces, I fairly chortled in my bed. And yet, so strange a thing is man, I felt some slight regret. I wondered if I had done right to kill them all. Say what you like, these chaps may be treacherous, arrogant liars—but they have their virtues too.'

'We can't complain of them,' observed Yvette.

'What I respect about them is that they have learnt their lesson. Discipline first, said Hitler, and no arguments. Prison for Communists, and barbed wire for the Jews. No room for Free-Masons, Cubist painters nor piddling poets. That's how Hitler talks. And he's doing a good job of work here too. One must recognize facts. Only yesterday in the house where I live, a Jew was arrested, a black-guard who was selling France retail, as in the days of Blum and Co. Pah! He had a Cubist picture in his dining-room. No mercy for the assassins, the executioners of France. True enough, we've got Hitler here. But there's more to it than that. Who are fighting the Communists? The Germans, of course: and they are doing all the things everyone would have liked to have done and couldn't, just because the Jew gang had the handle of the frying-pan. Sometimes I begin to think I'd like to be a German. And yet Boche is always Boche. No getting away from that. The papers talk about collaboration, and to Hell with honour. I know of course that all the papers are bought. But the Marshal too favours collaboration, and he's no fool: and he knows something about honour, I should think. And yet . . .'

During many months of reflection on these matters, Malinier had oscillated between two extremes that could never meet, and offered no possible alternative. His hatred of the Germans, and his gratitude for the benefits of Hitlerism, were implanted in his thick head like two

boundary-posts. He went from one to the other without being able to uproot them from his mind, or see them in the same perspective. Elizabeth Malinier, whose ears were deafened by his muddled outpourings, used to say that he could only think with one eye.

When Antoine came into the room, Malinier was still holding forth, with his head between his clenched hands. France, burdened by a compromise peace, lay dismembered, mutilated, reduced to a few provinces. A polyglot Hebraic horde had taken refuge on this narrow space, and lay there gorging on the sap of France and the marrow of the French people : the Communists cut the throats of the lawyers and the surviving patriots, while the Free-Masons shared out the State funds, and Cubist painters set up their easels on the Place de l'Opéra. Antoine made little effort to take any interest in these imaginative flights. The problems of war and peace left him indifferent. He was quite impervious to the humiliation of defeat, and life under the German occupation seemed to him normal. High prices, and the task of maintaining a decent level of subsistence, did not perturb him in the least. Like all the young people of his age, he had heard of butter at twenty-four sous, and he had the half-unconscious sense that humanity was on the march towards the butter at ten thousand francs a pound with the same steady momentum that had, from its earliest origins, propelled it towards universal and total annihilation.

There was a ring at the bell. Chou opened the door and ushered in M. Coutilier, ex-Inspector of Primary Schools. He came to ask after the French composition he had written for Antoine.

'The best thing,' said Malinier pensively, 'would be for the Boches to delouse France, suppress all Jews, Communists, Free-Masons, Cubist painters, financiers and poets—the whole Yiddish gang ; then, after a grand clean-up of

the whole country they should be packed off home, and this time, by God, right into the heart of Prussia, to Berlin in fact. Once there, we should need to do nothing but take a balcony seat and watch them liquidate Communist Russia.'

'Sir,' said the School-Inspector, who was still standing by the door: 'I have not the honour of your acquaintance, but permit me to express my astonishment that a good Frenchman can hold such views. I may tell you at once that I married my daughter to an Israelite.'

Malinier had not noticed the visitor's entrance; the sudden appearance of this old gentleman, with his husky voice and senatorial demeanour, rather took him aback.

'I just can't conceive it,' he said simply.

'Conceive what, Sir?'

'Letting one's daughter marry a Jew. On that point the Germans are unquestionably right.'

'Sir, your Germans killed my daughter during the exodus. They also interned my son-in-law.'

'Why do you say—your Germans.'

'Since you approve of their crimes, you obviously identify yourself with what they stand for.'

His lips drawn with hatred and contempt, the old gentleman looked at his interlocutor with blood-shot eyes, and the ashen grey of his lean face had suddenly flushed to a vivid pink. Malinier, apparently more composed, swallowed his anger with some difficulty.

'What crimes?' he asked. 'Is it a crime to intern Jews?'

'Sir, I am not concerned to answer you. There are matters that can only be discussed between persons of French blood.'

'I agree. A Frenchman who shed his blood for France is not called upon to argue with an elderly, Hebraicized Cubist.'

Although slightly intrigued by the designation Cubist, the inspector turned his back on Malinier, and, affecting to ignore him, began to talk about the French composition. It had been marked fourteen out of twenty, and the old gentleman maintained that the master who corrected it had misunderstood its purpose and not done it justice. He then launched into a summary of its chief points. Yvette and Antoine resigned themselves to listen, not without exchanging looks of consternation. By the irony of fate, the statement interested no one but Malinier. What had been intended as a summary soon assumed the amplitude of a discourse.

‘Before the idea of country,’ said the gentleman, ‘comes the country itself, which is not a concept, as might be assumed from the terms in which the subject was stated, but a reality—properly called a piece of real estate. Indeed, the reality of what the country is could not be better explained than by comparing it to a house, and if we had forgotten this, our misfortunes have made it clear : when the roof of a house gives way, the rain comes in. In other days, before our misfortunes came upon us, there were people foolish enough to contend that a man’s country was an artificial and absurd construction, owing its situation, extent and importance, merely to chance and historical contingencies, as exploited by personal interests. Isn’t it contrary to good-sense and every sort of logic, they would say, that because a poor devil was born a hundred yards more to the East or to the West, he should have to get his head broken for the Republic, or the King of Prussia ? These objections, which might indeed arise from a feeling of broad humanity, obviously took no account of the reality. What they said against their country, a peasant might well say about his house—that it was built quite arbitrarily and at random, that it was badly designed, that it would have been better sited

on the other side of the road, and that he himself might well have been born elsewhere. None the less, he does live in this house, and not in another on the other side of the road, nor was he born elsewhere. And this house he must, for duty's sake and his own, defend against the weather. . . . '

Malinier thought the old fellow was talking very good sense, but was alarmed to find himself, on the more essential and broader issues, in complete agreement with an obvious agent of Free-Masonry, representing the subversive policy that had brought France to defeat. There was no questioning the man's sincerity ; the ex-Inspector's good faith seemed to him beyond dispute.

Chou stood between her mother's knees, gaping at M. Coutelier's discourse, of which she could not understand one word. Whispering something in her ear, Yvette, with a meaning nod to Antoine, slipped out of the room and gained the shelter of the bedroom. That former nuptial chamber remained unaltered. The brass bedstead, the glass-fronted wardrobe, the dressing table and the two chairs still stood in their respective places, but the upholstery and wallpapers were faded, the furniture and floor were unpolished, and the window-panes were dirty. In one corner stood a pile of derelict packages and baggage. The room served as a lumber-room, and a bedroom for Chou. When she found herself in it, Yvette Grandmaison felt for the moment that she was returning to the past : not to indulge in any remorse of conscience, or lament the vanished years, but to recover a certain image of herself that had arisen within the framework of her married life. The memory of Jean Grandmaison, now a sergeant and a prisoner in a Brandenburg Stalag, was only associated with it incidentally. With clear-sighted curiosity, Yvette again viewed herself as she had been on the eve of war, in her role of assiduous housewife, discharging her feminine duties with nonchalant

efficiency, with a sort of casual intensity, a calculated conscientiousness, a slightly dæmonic exercise of will : she had patterned a quite effective if mendacious life out of a mosaic of truths. Her entire existence, had the war not come to divert its course, would have been passed in the pleasures and the pains of home, Yvette was quite sure. But she was not surprised to have changed direction at the bidding of opportunity. As a young girl, she had already been conscious of conflicting inward urges, and had indeed resigned herself to the view that they could not all be realized. As she developed into an exemplary wife, she had felt within herself these trends towards other existences, though undefined and unregretted. Today, after half a dozen liaisons with men of modest means, she lived on Antoine's earnings in the black market, and, conscious of a breach with the past, guessing the perils involved by choosing the line of least resistance, she still felt she was leading a normal life, and was not guilty of any self-betrayal. The absence of certain scruples, the indifference to large tracts of morality, which had in her replaced a narrow respect for the conventions, and the proper pride of an accomplished wife, did not constitute, even in her own eyes, a change of character. Exalted sentiments, a sense of honour and of self-respect, seemed to her to attach to a way of life, and not to the deeper nature of the individual. When Antoine joined her in the bedroom, the recollection of her activities as a good housewife, which had but lightly touched her consciousness, dissolved in the ardour of her impatience. As he locked the door, she said, slipping off her wrap :

‘ Is the old man still talking about patriotism ? ’

‘ He is. I only hope the other fellow won't knock him down.’

Antoine's fears were fortunately baseless, Malinier's

disposition not being at all bellicose, but reflective and even philosophic. The flagrant contradiction that he observed between the old gentleman's patriotic fervour, and his loyalty to the perverse forces of Judæo-Marxism, did not cause him any real surprise. His own life was split between two apparently irreconcilable principles. The perfect good faith with which the ex-School-Inspector accommodated his love of France with his acceptance of Cubist anti-France, made him ponder. He began to glimpse a region of the mind in which contraries, emancipated from the rigours of an inexorable logic, could easily come to terms without loss of their respective premises. He had no notion of any mental thimblery, or the disguised abdication of a principle ; he viewed the problem of this fusion under a vaguely æsthetic aspect which he did not yet feel competent to formulate. Despite his hostility towards Malinier who, with Chou, constituted his sole audience, the Inspector had not yet brought himself to interrupt his discourse, but began instead to give it a tendentious turn. Developing his metaphor, he described an honest farmer bringing up a numerous family in his ancestral home. Father of eight children, the farmer adopted an orphan who became as dear to him as his own sons, and repaid him with the tenderest affection. Malinier expressed his approval in nods and ejaculations and the Inspector, fearful that he had not made himself clear, stressed the fact that the orphan did not resemble his adoptive brothers.

‘And his name was Isaac.’

‘And why not?’ said Malinier pensively.

‘So you see!’ exclaimed the Inspector triumphantly.

‘Yes, I believe I begin to see.’

Chou had been interested in the story of the worthy farmer, but M. Coutelier went on to talk about the Germans, and again became incomprehensible. Chou had as yet no

conception of what an enemy or foreign country might be, and on the matter of Germans, her ideas were very summary. 'German' was for her synonymous with 'soldier', and the fear or antipathy inspired in many people by the green uniforms was sufficiently explained by the military profession, which consisted in killing other people. In view of the professional wickedness of these green men she did not dare to tell anyone that she was the daughter of a soldier, a German; and her mother did not seem very proud of the relationship, since she seldom mentioned it. Chou wondered why her father was a prisoner, whether he had killed too many people or too few, and particularly why he was a prisoner in a 'Brandenburg salad', which was her version of Stalag. M. Rigoulet,¹ who for three months past no longer slept in the flat on Saturday nights, had a pair of pyjamas with loops on them known as Brandenburgs, and even if it were possible to make a salad out of these bits of fabric, how could it be conceived in the dimensions of a prison? This was clearly one of those mystery-limits beyond which the universe remains fluid and engulfed in words, without power to take shape.

'Who knows if this child's father, now in a Brandenburg salad, may not be sent into a corner of the cream to fight the bear?' said the Inspector.

Nothing surprised Chou. As she observed M. Malinier

¹ M. Rigoulet had been before the war a traveller in footwear in south-western France. Under cover of his business, he made money out of deals in leather, kept Yvette in rather stingy fashion for four months, and then left to realize the ambition of his life: to become the lover of an actress. Denise, his new mistress, converted him to Fascism and anti-Semitism. He himself, aided by professional eloquence, made numerous converts. At the end of 1943, denounced by a jealous woman, he was consigned to a deportation camp. Released from this in April, 1945, he dexterously exploited his martyrdom, and assisted by his connections in the camp, obtained an important post in a Government Department. Having become too obviously addicted to drink, he was compelled to resign, and refused, as being beneath him, a post as Prefect which had been offered him in compensation. He now contemplates standing for Parliament.

she wondered whether the old gentleman's words were really more intelligible to him than to herself. He looked as though he could no longer follow, and was thinking of something else. His attention was concentrated on an ash-tray, and when Yvette came back into the room it was a little while before he could divert his eyes. Slowly, with shoulders squared and vacant gaze, as though he were balancing an egg on his head, he rose from his chair, absent-mindedly took his leave, and, without one mention of the prisoner, walked out of the room.

In the street, despite the darkness which favoured an effort at concentration, he could not maintain the precarious and still unfamiliar notion that had possessed his mind for the last quarter of an hour. It was less than an idea, and more than an intimation of the senses. He remembered as a boy having felt the same thing when he was on the point of finding the solution of some problem about the flow of water into a cistern. Stumbling on the edge of the pavement, he swore between his teeth, and the embryo idea he was conscious of within him, vanished, never to return. As a result of the fog, the night was already pitch dark. Malinier had no torch, as electric batteries were expensive and soon worn out. He groped his way home to his lodgement in the Rue de la Condamine. He was no longer thinking of anything consecutive and abandoned himself to the impression that he was making his way through a kindly world in which all the misery of the present was at rest. Night, like Noah's cloak flung over the defeat, kept him aloof from humiliating realities, engulfed the shadows of disaster, and thickened space in such a way that the sounds of German victory were hushed. He felt somehow that in a perpetual night the presence of the conqueror would have been so greatly diminished as to lose significance. From the rows of windows in the buildings in the Rue Lepic the black-out

curtains let a few blueish glimmers filter through, and now and again a shaft of white light, which merged into the milky hue of the fog. These fleeting gleams that flashed out of the houses altered Malinier's mood. The darkness was no longer kindly. He felt immersed in an artificial night, induced by the conqueror and favourable to his designs, a noisome night that whispered all the miseries of the vanquished. On the Place Blanche he nearly ran into a group of soldiers who had stopped at the corner of the Rue Lepic and were joking with a group of girls who made it a point of honour to express themselves in German. Malinier, not for the first time, was painfully affected by the spectacle. Although he had had no dealings with such girls since he had laid aside his uniform in 1928, girls were in his view a national asset, a category of beings embedded in the human concrete of the French community which he refused to consider from the merely physical point of view. One evening in the previous summer he had remonstrated with some professionals who were picking up Germans, pointing out that it was not right to sleep with the enemy, and that there were plenty of good Frenchmen to whom they could apply. His observations had been rather acidly received.

SEVEN

IN accents of profound conviction, Yvette had announced more than once that she had never been so utterly happy. Antoine had said the same thing rather more diffidently. To a lad, it all seemed so natural. He could find nothing in his recollection equivalent to that first evening with Yvette. The importance of these moments of his life never ceased to be present to his mind. He had been profoundly conscious of the sensation of liberty. The ecstasy of their mutual isolation did not prevent him noticing the passage of time, which assumed a fresh significance, and was, at once, a pleasure and a torment. Each revolving minute sharpened his bliss into a thrill of anguish, which reminded him of such feelings in his earliest childhood. When Yvette was out of the room the silence was almost sinister, the furniture began to look oddly different, and Antoine wondered whether he was just going to awaken from a dream. From time to time, in the course of conversation, and when he himself was talking, he suddenly saw his extraordinary situation with something like alarm, and, conscious that he was still no more than a boy, experienced a fleeting sense of shame. Yvette divined the lad's twinges and revulsions, scented the presence of the Michaud family and did her utmost to expel it. She talked with fervent sincerity and in passionate superlatives. 'I can understand people dying of love,' she said. Antoine could understand it too, but did not know whether he was capable of it.

'Darling Antoine, I just can't realize that you will leave

me to go home. It makes me crazy to think of it. Ten days are so soon over. I won't let you go.'

'But you know I can't do anything else.'

'Don't say you can't. If you loved me as I love you, you would manage to stay with me for good. It would be so lovely, darling.'

This was merely an idle fancy. As he was going to bed Antoine had a moment's uneasiness. He wondered until what time he would be expected to make love. In books and songs there was often mention of nights of love. In a serious novel, which had won a literary prize, he had read that in the course of a certain night two lovers had loved with such ardour that their pleasure had become painful. Antoine did not intend to go so far as that, but he would have liked to conform to the best traditions. Tiercelin, when consulted on the point, had said: 'As seldom as possible. Several times get you no further than the first, and tire you terribly.' But in this matter his opinion counted for little. Tiercelin was an ascetic, to whom all excess was repulsive. However, the first night passed off in accordance with his precepts of economy, as Yvette went to sleep immediately after the first embrace. Accustomed to sleeping alone, Antoine slept badly. About three in the morning he felt obliged to awaken Yvette, to give further proof of his ardour, but she turned to the wall with a grunt that indicated he had better not persist.

Next day, which was Sunday, they did not go out all day. Fearing that he might meet one of his family, or a friend of his parents, Antoine wanted to avoid going out in daylight. Not for a moment was he bored, nor did he miss his family. Moreover, the presence of Chou, who treated him with trustful affection, created an atmosphere of comforting domestic intimacy. Instead of the life which he had rather liked to picture, spent in breathless efforts to make the most of time, it seemed as though his stay in the seclusion of this

amorous retreat would pass in agreeable and easy intimacy. What astonished him most was to discover Yvette in a hitherto new light. Until then he had never been with her for more than a few hours. During those moments which seemed to them so short Yvette was full of the joy of the encounter, the desire to please inspired all that she said and did without any effort on her part. No doubt she could, if she had tried, have kept up to this level for an entire day, but Antoine's presence, already too familiar, had ceased to be an incitement. Now the tension was relaxed, she let herself be seen as she was, and was at times rather unguarded. He loved her too ardently to dare to alter his opinion of her, but in ascribing a few shortcomings to a passing mood the image of Yvette that he carried in his inner vision became a little blurred.

Towards the end of the morning Tiercelin came to see Antoine. Yvette was dressing. He found his friend arrayed in a feminine dressing gown on the divan of the chromium room helping Chou to cut out silhouettes from a fashion catalogue. After a word or two of greeting Antoine talked of the pleasures of liberty and extolled the delights of an existence given up wholly to love. Tiercelin stood listening in silence with a frigid, attentive expression on his face. When Chou, at a call from her mother, had left the room, he said to Antoine :

'I never liked the idea of your spending your holidays here, and I didn't hesitate to tell you so. Your temperament is not independent enough for this sort of thing. Yours is a sensitive little nature, and you are very responsive, possibly because you are still so young. You are one of those types so easily involved in the decorative side of life, the boudoir atmosphere, who end by becoming definitely feminine. All of which I have already told you. But now that I see you installed here with Yvette I am still more clear in my mind

that you are doing a very foolish thing. You are looking like a gigolo already and it won't be three days before you turn into a pekinese. If you could see yourself I think you would be disgusted.'

Tiercelin spoke with an apparent detachment that did not deceive Antoine. He knew his friend was distressed and uneasy.

'In a word, you regard me as an effeminate type, a puny, weak character, who has to be careful of the company he frequents.'

'No, I said you had a sensitive nature. Perhaps you think I'm trying to put it across you by pretending to be a man of the world, but I began to frequent my father's bar since I was thirteen and I can't help knowing more about life than you do. I have watched all sorts of affairs in which women were concerned, and I have come across a hundred cases like yours. Young and clever fellows, with a future in life, who were fools enough to let themselves get involved like this, and now waste their time in wretched little dilettante jobs.'

'The ten days I propose to spend with Yvette are not likely to wreck my life.'

'Ten days are quite long enough. At the end of them you won't want to go home. And then, if you aren't afraid of upsetting your parents, you would simply decide to stay with Yvette and earn your living on the black market. You wouldn't even take the trouble to pass your certificate in July. You may laugh, but I have seen much cleverer fellows than you fall for a bed and bathroom existence, often with a very ordinary woman. And I don't know whether you realize it, but Yvette isn't an ordinary woman.'

'I know that quite well.'

'Indeed? What do you really know about her? You think she's glorious, eh? Perhaps so, but what is quite certain is that she is much cleverer than you are. You know

I never did approve of your affair with her, and I was, and still am, very angry with Flora for having tipped you into it behind my back. If it had ever entered my head to involve you with a woman I would never have chosen Yvette. Anyway, it is I who am ultimately responsible: nothing would have happened if I hadn't been such a fool as to put you in the way of making money.'

Antoine flushed and, leaving the sofa, he replied in a snarling tone which Paul had never heard from him before :

'Money has nothing to do with it: Yvette loves me.'

'I daresay she does, but that doesn't mean that she would have loved you if you had been penniless.'

'You don't know her. A fortnight ago she actually asked me to give up the black market. She decided to get a job.'

'You ought to have taken her at her word. Has she said anything since?'

'There was no need to—I refused.'

Antoine looked defiant and his face was still inflamed. Paul walked to the window to give him time to calm down. It had been raining steadily since the morning. The houses opposite looked chilly and unwholesome. Antoine, now more composed, was visualizing the moment when Yvette had asked him to give up the black market racket. He saw the ardent face bent over his own, glowing with the joy of sacrifice, and he could still hear the quivering voice welcoming poverty as a reward. But this impulse towards good, this craving after virtue, had come to nothing, and had been appeased by a half-uttered refusal. Yvette's remorse had been no more than a passing flash. The next moment she had forgotten all about it. Following upon his conversation with Paul, these recollections appeared in a rather unpleasing light. On reflection, though the gesture did her credit, Antoine wished she had never made it. He joined Paul at the window and watched the falling rain. The water

from a cracked gutter pattered on to the pavement. A few umbrellas hastened along the Rue Durantin. On the fourth floor of the house opposite a small boy ¹ was leaning out of the window and trying to spit on to the concierge's umbrella. His father tip-toed up to him, grabbed him by the collar and clouted him on the head, which made the two friends laugh.

'I have a suggestion to make,' said Paul. 'If you like, we might both go to Chailley to-morrow morning in Primo's car. The weather will be foul, of course. A week in the rain exploring Othe forest all day, back in the evening tired out, to warm our shins at a good fire, dine, and go to bed. In the forest the leaves will be just beginning to show. The smell of it all in the rain is as filling as a loaf of bread. Not a bit like face-cream. And when you get back to Paris you'll smell the soaking forest and hear the hiss of the rain for months afterwards.'

Antoine smiled, turned his head, and glanced at the chromium room. He was quite happy here.

'You could then write genuine letters to your parents,' Tiercelin continued.

'I can't leave Yvette.'

'Why?'

Antoine did not have to answer. Yvette came in. She

¹ The name of the small boy, who was seven years old, was René Tournon. An affectionate and obedient, if rather mischievous boy, he lived happily with his parents and grandmother. Tournon, the father, was visited every week by two or three friends, Communists and members of the Resistance like himself, to whom he talked freely in the presence of his family. One day in September, 1943, René stopped a young German officer on the Boulevard de Clichy, and gave him a letter in which he denounced his father and his father's friends, giving the most elaborate details of their activities. But for the handwriting and his spelling the letter might have been written by a man very well informed on political questions. The officer, an Austrian lieutenant, made up his mind not to forward the letter to the Gestapo. and tore it up next day. For the next two months little René lived in a state of continual anxiety, though his face remained perfectly serene, and nothing in his behaviour betrayed his distress. Six months later, when his father died of double pneumonia, his grief was such that his health suffered.

seemed glad to see Paul and kissed him with the affectionate deference of a lady who frequented his father's bar. Young Tiercelin's elegance, his assurance and aloofness, obtained him an added measure of respect.

'Will you lunch with us?'

'I can't. I'm engaged. I came to ask Antoine if he would like to spend a week in the country with me.'

Yvette displayed neither surprise nor annoyance. Antoine noticed this not without resentment, and hastened to say :

'I told Paul I couldn't leave you alone.'

Yvette flung her arms round his neck and protested that she would have been very upset if he had gone.

'We'll say no more about it,' said Paul. 'Next year, perhaps. Shall I see you this evening?'

'Yes, I shall be at the bar with Antoine. Will Flora be there?'

'I hope not. The affair came to an end yesterday evening.'

This piece of news shocked Yvette, who wanted to know the reason, and how it had happened. Very simply, replied Paul. He had gone to Flora's place last evening and told her that he considered himself too young for a mistress.

'At seventeen I'm still growing fast, and that sort of thing is bad for me physically. So I have decided to give it up and spend the time in half an hour's physical exercises. I told her too that I should be taking my certificate examination in three months and that one can't do any serious work with a woman in one's head all the while. That's how it was.'

'But it's just crazy! You didn't realize what you were doing. Flora adores you, she'll get ill. It might kill her.'

'I don't think so,' said Paul. 'What I do believe is that she's annoyed on account of her friends and people that she knows. They had got used to seeing us together and knew it was an affair. As she values the opinion of waiters and the

haunters of certain bars, she will feel awkward when she meets them. I have advised her to leave the neighbourhood.'

Although he had been acquainted for a long time with Paul's views on Flora and on women in general, Antoine listened to this with amazement. None of the lads in his class, who were mostly of a serious disposition, would have dared to say in a woman's presence that he considered himself too young to have a mistress, and in fact none of them thought so, while Paul spoke with conviction and without the slightest bravado or false shame. Moreover, this rupture seemed to Antoine oddly directed against himself. Apart from the alleged reasons, there was an ominous symmetry between the two couples. Avoiding any comment which might have brought his own case forward, he stepped aside and watched the rain falling in the Rue Durantin. Less diffident than he, Yvette would not let the hint pass, and defended the rights of love. There was no reason why a lad of seventeen should not have a mistress; at that age many young fellows are already married, and often fathers of a family. Her own father, for instance, had been seventeen when he married her mother, a young widow of twenty-five. As to the suggestion that a man couldn't do his work properly with a love affair to think about, that was nonsense. Yvette again produced an example from her family, a brother of her father, who had pined all his life for a beautiful girl who did not care for him and had none the less distinguished himself at the Polytechnic.¹

'I shouldn't be likely to prevent Antoine from working—on the contrary. Anyway, as from to-morrow I shall insist on his working every morning from eight until twelve. Do you hear that, darling? Eight until twelve. I am certain that

¹ In reality, Yvette's father had been forty-two when he married a young widow at Auxerre, where he was postmaster. And her father's brother, a clerk in the Town Hall at Nevers, had married at the age of twenty-five.

if you stay here you will work better than you do at home.'

'Certainly,' agreed Antoine. 'I shall be much quieter here.'

'Of course you will. In the evening, when you get back from school, you can settle down there while I read on the sofa or go out shopping. Nobody will disturb you, and you won't waste any time in journeys. I have often thought of this already and I'm quite sure you had far better not go home next week.'

'No!' protested Paul. 'Please don't put that idea into his head again. He is already besotted enough. Look at him. He hasn't been here twenty-four hours and he is a domestic animal already. Passive, indifferent, vacant-eyed, all he can do is to say "Yes" to all your nonsense.'

'You would sooner he agreed with yours, of course. You have behaved like a cad to Flora and you want him to treat me in the same way. But Antoine still has a head on his shoulders, fortunately. Besides, he's old enough to know what he's doing.'

'That is exactly what he isn't. He's a boy who can be coaxed into anything. You know that as well as I do, and you exploit it.'

Yvette threw him a venomous look, and her nostrils quivered. But she controlled herself and smiled, and the marks of anger faded from her face.

'Let's change the subject,' she said. 'We both think we're right, we get excited and say things we're sorry for.'

'Anyhow, it's time for me to go. Good-bye.'

Antoine went with Paul to the front door and, as he shook hands, looked at him almost humbly.

'You will have the afternoon to think about that trip,' said Paul. 'You needn't decide till this evening. Start to-morrow morning at eight o'clock.'

'Look here,' said Antoine in a low tone, 'you know it's

impossible. Put yourself in Yvette's place. For the last month she has been thinking of nothing but these ten days we're to spend together.'

'All the same, when I suggested the trip she didn't say a word in protest. She didn't even look annoyed. If you knew Yvette better you would understand that such an idea seemed to her quite natural. In her view a decision taken between men is not to be questioned. But you make haste to remind her that you are an obedient little boy. The truth is that you're tied to her apron strings already. At the idea of a week without seeing her you feel weak in the legs and swimmy in the head. I don't say this to annoy you, but I assure you that you're in a bad patch.'

'The moment it's a question of women, you exaggerate everything. I love Yvette, and I want to be with her and I like to feel her near me. That's quite natural, and it would be surprising if it wasn't so. You don't know what love is, you despise it. But a fellow isn't done for because he's in love.'

'Good-bye. Think over that trip all the same.'

'Good-bye. Don't forget my letter and the parcel for my parents.'

'That's all right. I gave them to Primo yesterday evening. Your parents will get them on Wednesday.'

In the chromium boudoir Yvette was feeling uneasy at the lengthy colloquy on the landing. When Antoine came back she questioned him about their talk and warned him against Paul's manœuvres, the intention of which seemed to her obvious. There could be no doubt that he wanted to part them, and indeed he took little trouble to conceal the fact. She hinted that he had always had a rather warm feeling for her and that this inclination had been connected with his decision to break with Flora. Antoine would not believe this, and his scepticism irritated Yvette.

‘ You accept everything he says as gospel. When he’s with you you hardly dare to breathe. I saw it just now when he told us why he was parting from Flora. Everything he said about that was directed against us and aimed at separating us, too. I did protest and argue, but you, instead of backing me up, didn’t open your mouth. Anyone would have believed that you thought he was right, and after all, perhaps you did think so. In any case, it was very awkward for me. What did I look like, trying to defend our love all by myself? ’

Antoine felt like a very small boy, and, in quest of a retort, had recourse to a very reluctant lie.

‘ I didn’t say anything because I didn’t want to offend Paul. After all it’s he who put me up to making money.’

‘ True. As a matter of fact, I think you were right. I thought of that too, and managed to stop myself in time.’

So saying, Yvette gave Antoine a meaning smile, which annoyed him. He spent the afternoon in writing a letter to the prisoner, playing with Chou, and exchanging rather tepid and desultory conversation with Yvette. However, he felt perfectly happy. Between six and seven o’clock in the evening they received a visit from Flora, a handsome, tall, and dashing lady of twenty-eight, with a mane of dark red hair. She melted into tears in the arms of Yvette who addressed her as ‘ Poor darling ’. After a good cry she threw open her mink coat, planted herself in the centre of the room with her hands on her hips, and exclaimed in a masculine voice :

‘ I ask you ! A half-baked kid that I taught the facts of life to, and now he thinks he can pack me out at a minute’s notice because he says he “ is too young to have a woman ”. Too young ! And he comes and tells me that to my face, after me letting my feelings get the better of me and trailing him around for a year, flattering him, choosing his neckties,

taking all kinds of trouble for the little brat. I tell you what it is, the young men of to-day just don't know how to behave. And when I think that it was for his sake that I got rid of my Paimbœuf manufacturer! ¹ A man who adored me as if I had been the Holy Virgin, his heart on his sleeve, and only one Friday a fortnight, never more. He gave me anything I chose to ask for. But in love, I go all out. And I just fell for Paul. As you know very well, Yvette, I was never unfaithful to him, I swear it on my Mother's head. And it wasn't for the money he gave me. I can tell you now that Paul gave me twenty thousand a month. Of course I get a free lunch and dinner at his father's place. Twenty thousand francs a month! When I was a mannequin I earned as much as that in commission on the dresses. But I didn't think about money. I was in love, and that was that. The little beast—on the evenings when he left me alone I took his photograph to bed and went to sleep with his mug on my chest and his name on my lips. And all this to hear him tell me that he thinks he's too young, and he must prepare for his exam. Did I ever stop him? I tried to reason with him, but it was no good. He's so young that he can't think. He just snapped at me, and I couldn't bear it. However, I exist: I'm still here. I'll show him that a little

¹ During the occupation, returning to Paimbœuf by train, the said manufacturer entered into conversation with two unknown men, and taking advantage of his anonymity, confided in them that he had no patriotic sentiment. The unknown men got out at Nantes and greeted him by name. After the liberation, the manufacturer had to answer for the imprudent remark he had made in the train. Not being able to deny it, he admitted that he had no love for France. 'Patriotism,' he said, 'is a feeling not under control. I have never experienced it. It's not my fault.' The prosecutor pronounced an eloquent indictment, of which a salient passage was: 'Is it possible that a normal individual, healthy in body and in mind, should never have known the thrill of patriotic sentiment? No, it is not possible. In pretending not to be patriotic, the accused meant to jeer at the sufferings of our prisoners-of-war, and insult the sacrifice of our dead . . .' The defending counsel thought he saw a chance of catching the prosecutor with a syllogism. However, the Paimbœuf manufacturer was only sentenced to five years in prison and ten years loss of civil rights.

twerp like him can't treat me like dirt. I'll make him apologize. I'll have him sobbing at my feet. And when I've got him where I want him, and he tries to make it up, I shall say—"My little man, you've missed the bus."'

Flora was in such a state of exaltation that Antoine feared for his friend Paul. He envisaged a crime of passion. Yvette was making rather half-hearted efforts to comfort her, but her tearful consolations merely fanned the flame. Flora, whose resentment seemed to be growing, now launched into threats; they were not very explicit, but her violent utterance and frantic gestures betrayed what was in her mind. Before the evening meal, to which she accepted Yvette's invitation, Antoine went down to the café at the corner to telephone to Paul and warn him. His friend not having returned he did not like to say anything to the barman, but cursed himself for his timidity all through dinner. Despite his uneasiness, he noticed that the forsaken lady paid no attention to his presence and addressed herself solely to Yvette as though she regarded him as a child like Chou. Such an attitude upset him the more because he realized that it was unconscious. Her politeness to him on ordinary occasions was indeed far from sincere. This ill-dressed, awkward youth was a negligible personage in her eyes, and it was mainly to assure her superiority over Yvette that she had brought the two together. Yvette was well aware of this, and Flora's distress was therefore not altogether unwelcome to her. Nevertheless, the tone in which Flora was now talking began to make her uneasy.

'In love,' said Flora, 'I go all out, but I can hit back too. Paul's a little beast. He has treated me abominably, but I'll show him! After all, he started it. I'll do him in!'

She gasped with anger, her nose contracted and an ominous glare came into her eyes. Yvette and Antoine tried to calm her down, but she repeated:

‘I’ll do him in!’ And apparently noticing Antoine’s presence for the first time, she turned towards him and added in a rasping voice : ‘ You hold your tongue.’

He was sitting beside her, and being smaller than she, had to tilt his head to look into her eyes. She dominated him not merely in height, but by virtue of her age and her vast experience of love. Here, at his side, were rings, bracelets, and mink coat, an entire and sumptuous feminine apparatus, which he commonly despised, but which, in close proximity, impressed him. At Flora’s apostrophe, he could do nothing but blush, and hang his head like a child caught in some offence. Yvette herself was so annoyed by it that she would not give him an encouraging look. Antoine tried to comfort himself by Chou’s smile from across the table, but it was a rather acid consolation. When dinner was over Flora became silent and fell into a disquietingly ruminative state. After an exchange of uneasy looks Yvette went to put her little girl to bed and Antoine followed her to settle what they should do. Flora had made them promise to take her to the bar in the Rue de la Rochefoucauld. They decided that they must lure her elsewhere. During the confabulation Chou recited a prayer she had been taught by an old spinster on the first floor. She prayed God to keep her father well and cheerful, to preserve the Marshal’s life, and bring victory to France and her allies. Yvette stopped to listen, shed tears of emotion, and joined her in a Pater Noster. When they returned to Flora she was standing at a glass rouging her lips. When Yvette told her of their changed plans she showed no annoyance, and merely replied :

‘ You do just as you like, I am going to the *Pomme d’Adam*.’

She spoke with the calmness that accompanies momentous decisions. Since she was set on going to the *Pomme d’Adam* bar they had better go with her and try to forestall a scene.

In the street she became more normal for a moment and seemed to have forgotten what was on her mind. The rain had stopped and a few stars appeared between the clouds. In the darkness the two women talked with animation, quite ignoring Antoine's presence. Though she was walking with her arm in his, Yvette had almost forgotten him, for she was expressing herself with a freedom that surprised him and made him rather thoughtful. No doubt the darkness gave the two friends the illusion that they were alone. Talking of a couple whom they knew they discussed their private life in detail, commenting on the most scabrous episodes in the coarsest terms and with bursts of salacious laughter. As coming from Yvette, the vulgarity of language and acceptance of the grosser brutalities of life deeply shocked Antoine.

At the far end of the Rue de la Rochefoucauld Flora fell silent and did not speak again except to repeat her determination to settle her account with Paul. At the *Pomme d'Adam*, where the price of dinner was five hundred francs without wine, the diners were about half-way through their meal. M. Tiercelin, who had just returned from a game of cards in a café in the Rue Fontaine, was exchanging polite small talk with his regular clients. He was a man of fifty-five with immaculate white hair. Always well-dressed, he looked like a prosperous business man. His intimates called him Tierce-au-Dix, the allusion being to the brothel kept by his sister near by, which was numbered Ten. Five years ago he had set up house with a little inmate of his sister's establishment who was extremely useful to him in running his restaurant. As he passed the table where two German officers were dining with their women, Tiercelin greeted them with a slight bow and a faint smile that expanded considerably when they had replied to his salutation. Antoine and his two companions, without stopping in the

restaurant, made for a side door opening on a narrow vestibule which could be reached from the street through another door. A staircase lit by a single blue globe led down to the bar in the basement. It was still fairly empty. Paul was standing behind the counter, where he was acting as barman for a few minutes. He shook hands with the new arrivals, without showing the slightest astonishment at Flora's presence.

‘What can I get you?’

Yvette ordered three brandies, and as he was serving them Paul advised Antoine to have a glass of champagne instead. From vanity, and although he rather thought he preferred champagne, Antoine had a brandy. Flora seemed to have forgotten her sinister resolves. She followed all Paul's movements with the look of a beaten dog, and when he had filled her glass she thanked him in a humble voice and with an obsequious smile. He, for his part, treated her without any affectation of coldness or distaste, and spoke to her quietly once or twice. But once, as she opened her mouth to launch into an affectionate lament, he stopped her with a look that made her wilt into her mink coat.

While watching Flora's behaviour, which seemed more and more reassuring, Antoine now and again caught the eyes of certain clients fixed on him with an expression of surprise. ‘I know what is puzzling them,’ he thought with rueful humour: ‘they are wondering how such a shabby lad comes to be sitting in a bar between two smart women.’ His youth oppressed him more and more. The mirror behind the bar reflected a girlish face, as smooth and soft as a ripe fruit, and a graceful and lamentably feminine neck. A man of about thirty, sitting at the end of the bar, and wearing a monocle, began to stare at him with a chilly and slightly hostile eye. To keep himself in countenance Antoine swallowed his glass of brandy at a single gulp, and soon felt

its effects. A flush of warmth rose into his head and confused his mind for a moment or two. Hearing Yvette say that the man in a monocle was a German officer in plain clothes, he turned a rather blurred eye upon him, to which the monocle¹ replied with a smile of indulgent contempt.

The barman having resumed his post, Paul emerged from behind the counter and joined his friends at a table. Antoine was recovering his balance but his head was heavy and his eyes red and swollen. However, the bar began to brighten up. Most of the tables were occupied. Except for a few card-players, the clients, almost all of them regular habitués, came there for a comfortable talk in a club-like atmosphere, or merely to pick up a girl in a way that gave them the illusion of an adventure. Every minute Yvette had to reply to friendly greetings. As she was returning a polite smile to a man who passed their table, Paul said in a warning undertone :

‘That’s a Gestapo man. And the man with him at the bar is probably one too. Anyway, I’m sure about the first one.’

‘Yes, I know, someone else told me. But I don’t care.’

Antoine was shocked by Yvette’s reply. Patriotism was indeed in his eyes only a sentimental residuum of history. Before the defeat his father had often explained to him that the countries of the world should be considered merely as provisional entities, and regarded with the greatest scepticism, for they constituted the ideal environment, rich in blood and plasma, fertile and fattening, in which the

¹ Captain von Holberg, writing one day to his sister Gertrude : ‘It’s curious how the French like to wallow in remorse and bewail the accomplished fact’—here follow some forty lines explaining this tendency by the mixture of races, the preponderating influence of women, the vices of the Greeks, the Latins, etc. . . . ‘If I were called upon to illustrate the overwhelming superiority of our nation, in comparing the German and the Frenchman, I would say of the former that he is obsessed by envy, which gets him on, and the latter by remorse, which drags him back.’ Blown to pieces by a naval shell in Calvados in June, 1944.

parasitic bourgeoisies, of which the French was not the least voracious, could prosper, increase, and proliferate. But since the invasion Michaud had ceased to speak about countries in general, and without going so far as to exalt the land of France, he would launch into passionate lamentations over the distressful state of the country, and execrate the occupying forces, Nazi Germany, and even Germany as such. Antoine did not pay much attention to these paternal tirades, in which he recognized old habits of feeling and of thought trying to adapt themselves to the present issue. However, the sense of a great common disaster and, combined therewith, the realization of vague moral obligations, had at last unconsciously awakened in his mind, and Yvette's attitude made him aware of this fact. He already felt slightly embarrassed at finding himself in this rather intimate atmosphere and in the company of German officers. Time and place established between them a sort of complicity that he found irksome.

'What are you thinking of?' Paul asked him. 'Our trip to the forest of Othe? Now's the time to make up your mind.'

Antoine waved a hand in a gesture rather of indifference than hesitation. His eyes were fixed on the necks of the Gestapo agents sitting at the bar. In his turn he said to Paul, who had just exchanged a salutation across the room with some officers in uniform :

'Don't you mind having German officers here? They seem to make themselves pretty much at home.'

'If I tried to make distinctions between my father's customers I should have enough to do. Besides, I have nothing against them. They are probably the decentest fellows here this evening, and those I should most like to know. Please observe that I don't presume to form an opinion on the Germans or on Hitlerism. I haven't got one,

and I am not anxious to acquire one. It would certainly be mistaken.'

Paul spoke without the slightest affectation. Sincerity was always his chief concern. The bohemian surroundings in which he had grown up and his austere and independent character, had freed him from any kind of prejudice regarding the various sections of humanity. A man's social category, his profession, his status as belonging to a race, a nation, or a political group, represented in his view merely a summary classification of the human species, much too rough and ready to be seriously considered. Amid these more or less absurd generalizations he was solely interested in individuals and looked for men and characters alone. Antoine, who had not had to struggle against a corrupt environment, could not understand this indifference to certain aspects of life, and was baffled by Paul's incapacity to project a man against a human background. This evening he found him devoid of sensibility, almost narrow-minded.

'After all, you don't know these German officers of yours. They are mere illustrations in a catalogue.'

'I certainly could know them better,' Paul agreed. 'But don't forget I'm a barman. When a barman has served a man with a drink, and watched him drink it, he has something on which to base an opinion. There is also the fellow's face, which is a fair guide to his character.'

'You need to see them with their men, their superior officers, or at home with their families.'

'If you were seen in your family would anyone guess that you are a lady's darling? And if I were seen in mine, would anyone understand . . .'

Paul modestly left the sentence in suspense, but his companions completed it without difficulty, though in different ways. (If he were seen in his family, thought Antoine, would anyone understand that Paul was a stoic?

For her part, Flora thought: a cad. And Yvette, a bore.

'Now make up your mind. Are you coming into the country for a week?'

'Let Antoine do as he likes,' observed Yvette, with a sharp glance at him.

'Yes, you ought to go, it will do you good,' said Flora, to ingratiate herself with Paul.

'It's not your affair, nor Yvette's either, for the matter of that.'

'I have thought it over. I prefer to stay in Paris. When are you off?'

'I shan't go,' said Paul. 'As you won't come, there is no point in my going. I suggested the trip for your sake.'

'In fact, you wanted to take him away from me?' asked Yvette.

'I really think it would have been better for him,' answered Paul, and he added, looking at his watch, which stood at ten minutes past ten: 'I'm going up to bed.'

As his friends protested he explained that he had made up his mind to go to bed every evening at ten o'clock. He would cease to frequent the bars and night haunts of the district. He was sick of champagne, swing music, nights of sleepy gaiety, lively ladies, and the haunters of bars. 'I'm through with it for good,' he added in conclusion.

'While I think of it, Escartel has gone off this afternoon. He'll be back with the stuff on Thursday. If all goes well, he'll be at the usual shop about midday. If you want anything between now and then you have only to look up the saxophone player at Myston's and fix it up with him.'

'I do want some chocolate. Etienne asked me for some yesterday.'

'Another thing—I've got five thousand coffins to sell. If you like I can let you have half.'

‘Coffins? Well, frankly . . .’ And as Yvette gave him a gentle kick underneath the table, Antoine went on: ‘I hardly know how to handle a deal of that kind.’

‘Coffins go off very well, I believe,’ said Yvette.

‘Obviously it’s rather outside our usual lines of chocolate and ladies’ stuff, but I think it’s worth trying.’

‘But how on earth am I to find buyers for coffins?’ asked Antoine.

‘You won’t sell them retail, of course. You must dispose of the whole lot. You might see Ozurian and offer him a handsome percentage. Even if you let him have sixty or more the deal would bring in a hundred or two hundred thousand. Think it over. Goodnight.’

Deaf to Flora’s suppliant murmur, Paul got up and walked across to say good night to his father who was playing cards at the far end of the room. M. Tiercelin kissed him on the forehead and congratulated him on going to bed at such a sensible hour. Paul shook hands with the other players, and one of them said as he watched Paul go out:

‘He’s an odd fellow, that lad of yours. I knew you at his age, but I don’t see any resemblance.’

‘Paul, of course, is an intellectual. He works with his brain. Just think, he’s preparing for his certificate examination. I don’t know if you realize what that means.’

‘Ha!’ said a Corsican, ‘the lad’s quite right. If we had only had a decent education we might have gone far.’

‘Speak for yourself,’ replied the first player. ‘We should have ended up as a captain in the gendarmerie, or a music-master at a dame school. I don’t give a damn for education.’

‘One moment,’ said M. Tiercelin. ‘There’s more in it than that. Paul is an intellectual, but he is not a fool. He is certainly studying at the Lycée, but he gets another kind of education here. I have never encouraged Paul to go with girls, but you see for yourself how he treats them. Never

bullies nor swears at them, just puts them in their proper place as a man should.'

A good many clients got up to go home before curfew. About a quarter to eleven no more than fifteen were left, but they intended to stay on as they were ordering drinks, mainly champagne. Antoine remarked that it was time to go, to which Yvette replied :

'No, no, darling. We don't want to go just when we're beginning to get matey.'

The word matey cheered Antoine up. He looked round him with an uprush of hope and prepared to be sociable. On the seat in front of him Flora was emerging from her lethargy and was once more holding forth in accents of tragic fury. He heard her inveigh against Paul in that deep voice that had so alarmed him a while ago, and now annoyed him. Yvette listened to her tirade with indifference, and her heavy, languorous gaze strayed over the three rows of bottles arrayed behind the barman. But in the bar nothing happened. The promised mateyness did not materialize.

'In love, I've always gone all out, I've always given myself without reserve : does a little brat who hasn't ever lived think he can treat me like dirt ?'

Antoine began to think of his family, but without much warmth. Pierrette would be in bed already. Frederic, deep in his algebra book, would be toiling at some theorem with bovine patience, then raise his eyes to the ceiling, his face lit up by a solution that was slowly reaching consciousness. His father, lying beside the sick woman, would be reading a volume of memoirs, a volume of letters, or a biography, and commenting on it to his wife, who would respond with affectionate patience, but without much interest in what he was saying. Antoine felt very far away from them, already immersed in another life, another warmth, a rather doubtful warmth, but one he felt he needed. This cleavage, which

took possession of his mind as an accomplished fact, alarmed him slightly. He understood what Paul feared on his behalf : a sort of spellbound life, a lapse into the habits of a tepid, insignificant little existence which would sap his powers of thought and will. Not long ago he had been wondering what on earth he was up to, sitting over a glass of champagne in a place where he was not in the least amused. Now he knew that this evening was very important for him, since it was exactly what the other evenings would be like. It was both the present and the future, and as significant as the chromium boudoir, the divan, the armchairs, Yvette, Chou, the ex-Inspector of Schools, the smell of the dressing-room, the letters to the prisoner-husband, the blue dressing-gown, the roll of toilet paper.

While he was immersed in these unprofitable reflections the atmosphere of the bar had changed. There was talk from one table to another : attitudes became more casual, and conversation freer. Flora had gone to another table to vent her indignation. 'Too young, indeed ! Can you imagine such nonsense ! Besides, when he got into bed he never stopped . . . ' Some people came and sat with Yvette, chatted away to her and called her 'Dear'. The men tended to paw her about in a genial sort of way, or larded their talk with salacious double-meanings, which she pretended to disapprove of, but there was a glitter in her eyes. She herself often got up and took a turn round the room, moving from group to group. Once, at the bar, she had a word with the monocled German officer. On her return from these excursions she brought back scraps of gossip, which were the subject of much comment. Antoine, who thought them uninteresting, listened with avidity none the less. He felt already on intimate terms with all the clients of the *Pomme d'Adam*, and without losing sight of the futility of their talk, and without ceasing to be bored, he religiously

compelled himself to enjoy the viscous mystery of that intimacy. Impatient to take his share in it he was worried that he could contribute nothing. The clients took no notice of him. He was no doubt taken for Yvette's young brother, or for her concierge's son. The people sitting at her table were polite to him, threw him a smile or a friendly word now and again, but excluded him from the conversation.

After about an hour it was put about the room that Antoine—the little fellow sitting at the end of the table beside Roger, and so young—was Yvette's lover. Whereupon the company began to treat him with respect and make advances to him. A very imposing gentleman announced that he was a great lad, and everybody agreed. His eyes brimming with joy, Antoine became the entranced recipient of comments and confidences utterly devoid of interest. His initiation was too recent for him to venture to rise to the required level, but he longed for the next evening when he could establish himself in the intimacy of the *Pomme d'Adam* and play an active part in all this futility.

About one in the morning Flora came up and suggested to Yvette that they might finish the night with a group of clients in a bar in the Rue de Bruxelles. One of them knew how to get admitted. Yvette was rather disposed to go, but noticing the weariness on Antoine's face she thought it wiser to go home. She was afraid that Paul might hear that they had gone to bed at four in the morning, and make her responsible for it. She aimed a charming smile of regret at Flora's friends, among whom was the German officer in civilian dress. His gleaming monocle lent him such a commanding air that she bestowed another smile on him, to which she imparted a little more regret. Before leaving, while the officer was paying for the champagne, Flora approached M. Tiercelin, who was finishing his game of

cards. He listened to her murmured appeal without the slightest sign of impatience and disposed of her with the utmost suavity.

‘My dear girl, you don’t seem to understand. There are certain things one can’t ask of a father. If Paul is bored with you that is because you don’t excite him any more, and what on earth am I to do about it? Besides, I’ll tell you something. I do pay some attention to Paul’s women, but only as much as is necessary, and no more. When I saw that you attracted him I said to myself—is she a suitable girl for him? I consulted various people who knew you intimately. I ascertained that you were healthy, well-behaved, and of good character, so I gave my approval. I had done my duty. After that, the matter was no business of mine.’

As they left the bar and walked up the dark incline of the Rue Fontaine, Yvette and Antoine had the feeling that they had met again after a separation. Antoine even felt nearer to Yvette than he had ever been. Those empty, buzzing hours, of which no more remained than the memory of a vague clamour, established something like a bond of complicity between them. They walked close together, looking nervously about them. Paul had warned them of the risk run by Antoine in going back after the hour of curfew. If he were picked up by a patrol his father might be informed. They talked almost in an undertone.

‘It was nice in the bar this evening, wasn’t it?’

‘Marvellous,’ replied Antoine warmly. ‘I had only been there for a drink before dinner, and that’s quite different. I would never have thought it could be so jolly. Especially after eleven. The people are so bright and charming, and one feels so much at home. It’s a grand place.’

‘And it’s always better on a weekday too. On Sunday there’s rather a mixed crowd like there is everywhere. Darling, I’ve been thinking about us. I’m so anxious to find

some way in which you can stay with me for good, and not go back home. And I've found one.'

'You know it's impossible.'

'Wait, you'll see. What if a policeman turns up at your home next week and says to your father: "Your son, Antoine is accused of espionage for the English. We have proof. Tell us where he is hiding." Next day you send a note to your father: "Don't worry, I'm quite safe."'

'Will it be a sham policeman?'

'Maybe, maybe not. You can get a real one for five hundred or a thousand francs. Isn't that a simple dodge?'

Antoine did not reply. He thought of his parents, of his mother still bedridden, and wondered how she would stand the shock. The sham policeman dodge also seemed to him rather thin, and he did not believe that his parents would be taken in by it. But the prospect of a return to the domestic circle appeared to him in the light of a catastrophe, a relapse after an illness, which would be more than he could bear. He envisaged the distance travelled since the day before, a sharp short cut between boyhood and manhood, a cancellation of bleak, interminable years.

EIGHT

MICHAUD took his letters from the concierge, and paused for a moment in the hall to look at the headlines in the newspaper. His wife's impatient voice came from the bedroom to ask if there were any letters. Glancing over the envelopes he recognized Antoine's handwriting.

'A letter from Antoine,' he said, as he entered the bedroom.

He walked slowly towards the bed, and stopped in the middle of the room. Hélène suppressed a sharp remark, but her hands clutched the sheet convulsively. She was irritated by her husband's dilatoriness, and shocked that he seemed more eager to read his newspaper than to get news of his son. At last Michaud handed her the letters and went on reading the paper, as though Russia, the Pacific, and Tripolitania were of more moment to him than his children. Antoine's letter covered four pages: he had even gone to the length of writing across the margins.

'He had a good journey,' said Hélène, 'except that he had to stand in the corridor as far as Montereau.'

Michaud did not seem to have heard. He was away in the Libyan desert, New York, New Guinea, Kaluga, and Lake Ilmen. Although she was only half way through his letter, Hélène paused to make a few reflections. They were all inspired by the same fact: for her husband, his family was one among many human landscapes, a delightful resort where his mind found repose from time to time after his descents upon the thronged worlds of London, Moscow,

Pittsburg, Nankin, or the banks of the Ganges. He regarded his family as he did his country. He loved them both, but he had never envisaged them except from very far away, from Pernambuco or Timbuctoo. Perhaps if the moon had been easier of access to his imagination, he would have there installed himself to contemplate the earth. In point of fact, thought Hélène, he is there already. Dear man, incapable of hating the Germans, except on principle, and whose love for his wife and children is no more than a vague and rather indiscriminating impulse of the heart. He is not like me. I love my family because it is my own. I love France because it is my own country. I hate the Germans because they are in my native land. Where I stand the world begins. There's my husband, my children, and men who talk as they do. And what is far away is far away. Hélène surveyed the Michaud couple for a moment, and smiled an affectionate smile. It seemed to her at that moment to wear a harmonious aspect, and Michaud himself appeared a vaguely impressive figure. Halting her reflections at this point she went on reading her letter, which she was not enjoying as much as she had expected.

‘It's an odd sort of letter. It reads almost as if he were trying to hide something. Perhaps in his heart he's a little bored.’

‘A letter to parents is always something of a school imposition,’ observed Michaud, looking at Hélène over the top of his newspaper. ‘Indeed I don't think one ought to make children write letters. It just teaches them to prevaricate, and to write for the sake of writing, which is even worse. They do enough of that sort of writing at school. Boys ought really not to learn to write before the age of fifteen. Writing shrinks the mind, and takes the heart out of life and the future. We all write too much, read too much, and talk too much. I realize this from my own case. At

breakfast I devour the newspapers. Between nine a.m. and six p.m. I write, dictate letters, telephone, and read reports. In the evening I bury myself in a book. And the radio all day long. London, Algiers, Moscow, New York, not to mention Paris. There are days when I am tired of the victory to come. In the end words take the bloom off hope. After the war humanity will most need silence and contemplation. If I had . . .’ Michaud was about to say: ‘If I had children,’ and stopped rather awkwardly. He had lost the thread of his discourse. Hélène had just opened another envelope, and looked upset and uneasy as though she had received bad news. As she read, her face became drawn and pale. Michaud, who had almost lost interest in his wife’s moods, did not notice this altered look. He launched into a disquisition on America, descanted on liberty and democracy, and in a sudden access of gloom, lamented that the words most dear to a loyal citizen had a meaning that was never more than transient. The front door slammed, announcing the return of Pierrette, who had got up early to do the shopping. She came into the room with her basket full of provisions, and was hardly through the door before she had begun the recital of her tribulations. Her cheeks were as ruddy as apples, and Michaud beamed at her.

‘A woman tried to get in front of me, she dragged at my cloak, but I wouldn’t give way. The whole queue yelled at her.’

Observing the letters scattered on the bed, she broke off and looked at her mother.

‘It’s from Antoine,’ said her mother, handing her the letter. ‘He has arrived safely.’

Pierrette flushed and stammered something as she took the letter. She was so upset that it was not until after a moment or two that she noticed she was holding it upside down. On the day before, in the early afternoon, as she was

walking with a friend down the Boulevard des Capucines, she had met her brother Antoine. He was strolling arm in arm with a woman of more than twenty-five, quite old, but pretty and well-dressed. The woman was looking at him with fish-like eyes, and he at her with an affectionate, rather foolish smile. Walking very close together, with their two heads nearly touching, they had made a striking pair. Antoine was as handsome as a film-star. When he caught sight of his sister a few steps away from him, his face darkened, then he turned his head away and resumed his smile and his conversation. The woman noticed nothing.

Pierrette had said nothing to her friend either, but her knees had begun to tremble. The imposing lie about a holiday in Burgundy had upset and indeed appalled her. Until then Antoine had been in her eyes a pillar of the family existence. He was more sensitive than his father and mother to the need for harmony in the domestic circle, on which he always produced a beneficent effect. If Pierrette had passed him alone on the Boulevard, she would have thought the Burgundy holiday was a pious lie, conceived for the benefit of the family. But the evidence was clear. There was a love affair in question. And what was most upsetting was that he should have been with a woman of twenty-five and perhaps thirty. On this same woman's arm, he was making his way into an adult world beyond his sister's reach. At home, in spite of his good sense, intelligence and ability, he figured as a boy, and Pierrette had always felt on a level with him. This was now all over. There was now a grown woman in his life, a woman with whom he no doubt lived and slept. Perhaps he even committed the act. Indeed, as she thought it over, rather disgustedly, she could not doubt that he had done so. She might have accepted this without repulsion, if not without alarm, if it had been with a friend of his own age, Clemence

Robichon, for instance. But a woman of twenty-seven—it was loathsome and obscene. That abominable woman—how Pierrette detested her. She would have liked to spit on her painted face. . . . ‘This morning, almost as soon as we arrived, we took our first walk in the forest of Othe. It was really lovely. We had the farmer’s dog with us ; a grand beast with a shaggy red coat, called Finaud. He jumped all around us barking, and then dashed like an arrow through the trees. I love the forest at this time of year, unlike Paul, who prefers it in the summer. And such pure air ! During my walk I thought a great deal about you all, and I was particularly sorry not to have my little Pierrette with me. . . .’ As she read this passage in Antoine’s letter, Pierrette burst into tears, and could not hide them from her parents. When questioned :

‘I don’t know,’ she replied. ‘It was just from reading Antoine’s letter.’

The parents accepted this reply. Hélène did not pay the same attention to this outburst of tears as she would normally have done. A deeper anxiety was weighing on her mind. With a slow movement of the arm that Michaud could not fail to notice, she handed him a folded paper. It was the school report, containing Antoine’s marks and places at the end-of-term examinations, and the professors’ criticisms. Michaud’s face became congested. The marks and the criticisms were in agreement. They revealed a sudden falling-off in Antoine Michaud’s work. The headmaster expressed his surprise at such an unexpected lapse, which he described as something like a catastrophe.

‘God in Heaven ! What on earth is happening ? It’s beyond all sense and reason. Here is a boy who has always been near the top of his class, and suddenly he turns into a mediocrity—indeed something like a dunce. The little wretch ! And now he has managed to get away for a

holiday on the top of a report like this, while his brother and sister have to stay in Paris ! Holiday, indeed ! Twenty-second in history—twenty-second ! It's positively shameful. Well, I'll deal with him when he gets back, the young scamp.'

Hitherto, Michaud's children had all been very good at their schoolwork, without any encouragement from their father, and indeed he was rather deliberately indifferent to their scholastic prowess, and tended to judge his sons' progress by their sentiments and behaviour, rather than by a high place in class. He liked to argue that the value of secondary education is conventional, acknowledged and imposed by a minority in defence of that convention. The bourgeois section of society, in thus maintaining its sons and adherents in outmoded traditions, aimed at segregating them from the herd by an indelible imprint, and compelling them to remain within it. Michaud even reproached himself for having let them in for such deleterious influences, and often warned them against their professors, and the perilous prestige of classical culture. Antoine's end-of-term report may not have altered his opinions on secondary education, but certainly shifted them to the back of his mind. He suddenly found himself a staunch advocate of Virgil.

'It's beyond all sense and reason,' he repeated. 'What on earth can have happened ?'

'That's just the question. What can have happened ?' But for H  l  ne the question assumed another form. 'Perhaps it's his health,' she said. 'For some time past, I don't think he has been looking well.'

'That's not a reason. Besides, he has never complained.'

'Antoine doesn't like to worry us. Without being precisely ill, he may be feeling low and depressed, and at his age that's a thing to be careful about.'

Michaud rejected his wife's explanation. He was still too

irritated to abandon the idea that Antoine was to blame and preferred to believe that the failure was deliberate. Hélène let him continue for a moment or two, and asked Pierrette to go into the kitchen and put a saucepan on to boil. When the girl had left the room she raised herself on her pillow, and beckoned Michaud to sit down beside her, as though to warn him of the importance of what she was going to say.

‘I am very uneasy,’ she said. ‘If it were just a matter of a bad report, that would be simply vexing, but I am thinking of what is behind it. Antoine has always done well at school. He is cleverer than Frederic though less industrious, and he has always worked with a sort of casual ease, no doubt because he was sure of his powers, or to get over the monotony of the daily routine. But it’s quite certain that he did know how to interest himself in his work, and that he really meant to make a brilliant success of it. I remember how upset he was last year when he was only eighth in Latin composition.’

‘He can’t even do as well as that now’ said Michaud derisively. ‘Twenty-second in history!’

‘Exactly. There must be some solid reason why Antoine has suddenly lost interest in his place in class, and his liking for work, which, as we know, he has always had. In fact, his whole attitude of mind has changed almost overnight. It’s as though there had been a real upheaval in his life.’

Hélène paused, in the hope that Michaud might have some explanation to suggest. But Michaud’s sole conclusion was that he had not treated his son firmly enough, and that he had perhaps been wrong in not believing in the virtue of a kick in the backside.

‘I was wondering just now,’ she continued, ‘whether the cause of all this might not be that the boy is tired or depressed, or even a little anæmic. You don’t think so, and

I don't really think so either. I pay too much attention to the children's health not to notice if he was ill. Antoine hasn't got a cough, he has a good appetite, he is in good spirits, and if he hasn't looked up to the mark lately, there was no cause for alarm. I have often seen him look like that when he sits up over a school essay, or reading in bed. No, Antoine is certainly not ill. What then ?

A fresh silence. Well, then ? Michaud was trying to make out what might have gone through his son's head, and to trace the process of his mind. He was much inclined to see in this access of laziness on the part of a candidate for the Certificate, the result of a vicious course of reasoning, a backsliding on to a sort of philosophic slope, from which the fear of the paternal boot ought to have restrained him. The silence continued. Michaud began to lose sight of the point of the conversation. Pondering on the value of a kick in the pants, he went on to consider the problem of recourse to armed force, the essential significance of wars, and the vagaries of justice. Hélène realised that his mind had strayed, and decided to break the silence.

'You may think I'm being dramatic, or that I have lost my sense of proportion, but I can't help that. The more I think over this business, the more convinced I am that there's a woman at the bottom of it.'

The idea struck Michaud as being so ludicrous, that he burst out laughing. But on reflection, he found it less absurd, and even reasonable.

'It is not, in principle, impossible. Love can certainly produce a temporary loss of balance, or a listless condition which might make a Latin prose look uninviting. A boy of sixteen may well imagine himself in love. All the same, I don't think that is what has happened to Antoine. In a boy of his age, a boy without experience, love is little more than a dream, a kind of hazy enchantment, sensual of course,

but without the aching wounds left in a grown man by the memory of possession. Love, in general . . .’

‘Listen,’ said Hélène. ‘When I said there was a woman behind this I wasn’t talking about a childish romance. It is my opinion that Antoine has a mistress.’

Michaud again burst out laughing, but after due reflection, had to agree that the theory was worth considering. After all, a boy of sixteen is subject to the law of his species just like a man. From the moment the mechanism exists, the function, despite all bans and prohibitions, seeks to fulfil itself. No, it was not impossible that Antoine had a mistress. All the same, Michaud conceived it as a purely theoretic possibility, which did not advance matters. Hélène was inclined to be more definite. Reviewing Antoine’s attitude during the last two months, she found evidence in support of the woman hypothesis. In the course of this second term, he had fallen into new habits, such as that of coming home at six or seven o’clock instead of at half-past four on the pretext of working with Tiercelin, or of visiting an exhibition, or getting a pound of butter at sixty francs from a friend at Aubervilliers. In the end, his late arrivals became a matter of course and were accepted without explanation.

‘God in Heaven!’ exclaimed Michaud pompously. ‘If I had only known! But nobody tells me anything, and when the harm is done, we’re surprised. . . .’

‘But you did know. I mentioned it to you several times, and you said it didn’t matter.’

On one occasion when he came back at eight o’clock, Antoine had pleaded a round-up on the boulevard, followed by verifications of identity-cards at Police Headquarters, and his father had thought the story highly dubious. Moreover there had been a number of other indications, passed over at the time, which now began to look ominous. Not

to mention the feverish, wandering, blurred look in his haggard eyes, there was, for instance, Antoine's habit of marking the place in the novels he was reading with a ribbon from a brassiere: his mania for scribbling on his books, exercise-books, the blotting paper, and even on the lining of his overcoat, the two initials Y.H. or Y.G., Michaud did not remember which. Yes, they must have been blind not to realize that Antoine had a mistress.'

'What are you going to do about it?' asked Hélène abruptly.

'Do? I don't know. What do you want me to do? Of course we could write to Antoine and tell him to come home, but is that really necessary? After all, I would as soon have him in the country as in Paris. As long as he's there, one can at least feel assured that he's not with the woman.'

'I'm not so sure about that,' observed Hélène. 'My view is that he has gone with her, and that this holiday is simply an excuse for them to be together.'

'Don't let's exaggerate,' said Michaud. 'After all, he is with his friend Tiercelin's cousins.'

'But we don't know these Tiercelins. We don't even know if they exist. In any case, it seems to me that the best thing to do would be to find out what sort of people they are. A restaurant in the Rue de la Rochefoucauld must be easy to find. They may perhaps help us to discover who this woman is.'

'If indeed she exists,' said Michaud, quizzically. 'All right, I'll go and see the father in the course of the day. I shan't have time this morning. I'm horribly late already. It's nearly nine o'clock. I must rush. Is there anything I can do for you?'

He was glad to break off an interview which had more than once slipped out of his control. In the hall, while

putting on his overcoat, he felt in his pockets and not finding his cigarettes, emitted a wrathful yell. Had that young scamp Frederic pinched the packet from his coat? Dashing into the boy's room, he went straight to Frederic's table and flung open the drawer. It was crammed. Michaud, to salve his conscience, threw a few exercise books aside, but without result. At the far end of the drawer, a pink exercise-book of unaccustomed thickness, and bearing the legend 'Analysis', vaguely attracted his attention. Lifting the cover, he came upon two stacks of printed leaflets, and picked one up at random. 'Workers of France,' said the tract, 'Boche Fascism, the tool and ally of Capital, has declared ruthless war on the working classes. . . . ' Then followed an indictment of the forces of occupation, an appeal to sabotage and resistance by every means and method. He had nearly read it through when Pierrette came in, and noticing the tract in her father's hand, glanced uneasily up at him. Michaud understood that she was in the secret, and questioned her.

'Frederic has never said anything to me,' said Pierrette, 'but the other day when I was looking for something in his drawer, I found the stuff.'

'Well, be careful not to mention it to your mother. If she came to hear of it, it would be the death of her.'

Pierrette promised, and Michaud having replaced the document on the pile, departed to his office. In the street an access of melancholy came upon him at the thought of the gulfs which had suddenly appeared between his sons and himself. Frederic's activities and Antoine's love affair were equally disconcerting. Beneath the impact of this double discovery, he felt himself strangely astray and dispossessed. Hitherto he had lived in the illusion that he was the head of a family, a true father in the spirit, whereas he had never been anything but a foster-father whose

ramblings merely served to beguile his children's dreams. One of them took a mistress, the other joined the Communist Party, and neither of them had asked his advice. And indeed why should they? He, Michaud, had never said anything that could have enlightened them on their chosen course. In politics, his attitude had been mainly nostalgic and sceptical. Love, he considered, was overestimated, and too much talked about. He tried to picture a tête-à-tête between Antoine and his mistress, languishing looks and passionate protestations, but he could not conceive his younger son as in the least eloquent.

But what astonished him most was that Frederic should be a Communist. He did not understand how this gawky lad, apparently impervious to everything but mathematics and food, should have taken a decision that committed him so deeply. At home he was not interested in the war nor in any social question, and if anyone tried to rouse his sensibilities, he replied with an indifference that did not seem in any way affected. Distress and suffering and injustice left him unmoved. He seemed to be armoured against emotion. And yet his heart—his heart and his mind—must have opened to another's words. A man not dowered with paternal authority had talked to him about injustice, and had patiently expounded the arguments that were to draw him into Communism. And Frederic had responded, he had listened to these same arguments, and having pondered, weighed and judged them, had been finally convinced. Michaud could not believe it. 'I realise,' he said, 'that one never knows one's children, but all the same . . . By and large, one can tell, quite generally, how they will feel and think and react. There are in a character certain broad features and outlines as clearly marked as the shape of a nose, and this is particularly true in Frederic's case. When I think of him, I find myself confronted with

certain manifestations that I cannot disregard, but which do not accord with the reactions which his adherence to the Communist Party must have entailed. Is it possible or even conceivable that he was touched by his country's distress? No. That he fell for an idea of which he recognized the force and constructive value? I say—No, again. Emphatically—No. And yet something of the kind must have happened.'

After much reflection Michaud had an inspiration. Again he saw his discovery of the morning, the two piles of leaflets lying in the drawer beneath the book-cover inscribed 'Analysis'. Frederic was not in. Every day since the holidays he had got up at half-past six, on the pretext of a bicycle-ride. Obviously he had gone out to distribute the leaflets. Michaud imagined him pedalling through the northern suburbs and dismounting at the gate of a factory just when the workmen were arriving. In the half-light of morning, Frederic, standing among the influx of workers, handed out his leaflets, thinking perhaps with satisfaction of his as yet half-awakened family. As a result of this vision, everything became clear to Michaud. His son had not become obsessed by an idea, nor succumbed to a moving depiction of the miseries of the occupation, or social injustice. He had accepted a mission. Someone had come to him and suggested that he should act as became a man, that he should at last extricate himself from this humiliating parenthesis in which the family and his professors at the Sorbonne kept him immured. Frederic had, without reflection, jumped at the opportunity of cutting short a tiresome adolescence which was not even an apprenticeship. He had eluded the forces of authority, and managed to get back into life. Antoine, for his part, had done much the same thing.

'I have got terribly old of late,' said Michaud a few

instants later to his partner who was sitting opposite him. 'Apart from my age, which indeed I do begin to feel, I realize that I have come to a dead stop. Our epoch is marching onwards with seven-league boots, so to speak, and I don't move, indeed I have never moved. I date from the Restoration. And when I say the Restoration, I am paying myself a compliment. I am perhaps just a back number of the present day.'

For the past two days, Lolivier had been in very bad shape, and was not at all disposed to receive confidences.

'Take care,' he observed in an aggressive tone. 'You're a failure, and the fact that you are a failure makes you say that sort of thing. Because you have two sons who are getting more or less out of your reach, you become excited and do your best to persuade yourself that you're a back number. That's silly, and merely goes to show that you are a failure.'

'But I don't think I'm a failure. I was on the classical side at school, I practice what may be called a liberal profession, I earn considerably more than if I had been a Professor at a Government School, and I'm giving my children a bourgeois education by sending them to the Lycée. Where is the failure? I am a bourgeois. Not very distinguished, if you like, but certainly bourgeois.'

'The classical side at school, and the practice of a liberal profession do not make a bourgeois. You are, however, a bourgeois, and of the most degraded and lamentable kind, the kind with a conscience but no reflexes. You are not the only one. Anyhow, it's no damned business of mine. Did you see the lawyer yesterday?'

'I beg your pardon, but a man who has had a good education is a bourgeois for life, I might even say a capitalist. In point of fact, a lad who continues his studies to the

age of twenty or twenty-five is a little gentleman who capitalizes his youth, instead of making normal and immediate use of it. To ensure himself the amenities of life in middle age, he consents to remain for ten years on the outer edge of life, and to learn passwords like '*Video meliora proboque*' which are the first steps towards the Legion of Honour. You may not know this, but my two young hopefuls have managed to find it out and act accordingly. They reflected on the example of their poor old father who sacrificed ten years of his youth in order to learn to think, when such an accomplishment was already quite useless, and they understood that to get forward, to be in the swim, it was necessary to act first and think afterwards. Now school-work . . .'

'You're quibbling,' cut in Lolivier, 'and you know you are. The plain truth is, and you know it as well as I do, that engineers are needed to run factories, architects to build houses, artillery officers to blow them up, and professors to teach them to blow them up.'

'Did I ever deny it? Of course architects and artillery officers are needed. But oughtn't they to be learning their job at fifteen or sixteen instead of wasting years in grinding at Vergil, Racine, Plato, and a lot of stuffed-shirts who serve no purpose in the present age?

'Bosh—you embittered old humanist! You positively tremble as you utter these appalling blasphemies. Don't let yourself get as depressed as all that!'

'I'm perfectly serious. For the moment, I'm absolutely sincere. I'm trying to understand my boys.'

'Well?' exclaimed Lolivier derisively. 'Are you satisfied? You understand and approve of them. You, a fumbling old social-idealist, are proud to have a son who risks his skin for a cause which you inwardly detest as much as Nazism, and you certainly won't prevent him.'

‘I respect his choice, and I am proud of him, that’s all quite true.’

‘And the other, little Benjamin, who has gone off with a girl, I hope you respect his choice too? Love, like heroism, deserves respect.’

‘You’re a fool,’ said Michaud. ‘And you are talking nonsense.’

‘So I am,’ agreed Lolivier, ‘and I am all the more to blame because I don’t believe a word of what I’m saying. Still, what are you complaining of? If my son distributed leaflets at a factory, I should be in the seventh heaven, and bless myself for such an offspring. Of course I should be a Communist too, and a pretty hot one. However, no such luck comes my way.’

‘No news yet, I suppose?’

Lolivier did not appear to have heard the question. In any case, the telephone bell rang and absolved him from replying. He lifted the receiver, and then handed it to his partner.

‘It’s for you.’

‘Hullo . . . Yes, it’s me . . . What, he’s dead? . . . What happened? . . . Yes, of course . . . You did quite right . . . Good-bye.’

Michaud looked troubled. After replacing the receiver, he sat for a moment in silent concentration, his head clasped in his hands.

‘It’s the concierge at the Rue de Prony,’ he said, in a gloomy tone. ‘Colonel de Monboquin died this morning about five o’clock. I don’t know if you remember. His wife wanted to prevent him going to the German Institute to hear a lecture on archæology. I was there, and I succeeded in inducing him not to go. He went to bed in disgust, and never got up again. This morning he was found dead in bed. So there it is. He’s dead.’

Leaning forward with his elbows on the table, Michaud bent his head, and looked quite overwhelmed. Lolivier looked at him, and was suddenly seized by an outburst of maniacal laughter that almost shook him out of his chair. His eyes and nose were streaming, and the skin on his skull was purple. Michaud glared at him dumbfounded, but the maniacal laughter soon infected him too. Sprawling across their desks and shaking all over, the two partners choked and gasped and wept with laughter. Now and again, one of them tried to speak, but the words stuck in his throat, and when they began to calm down, an exchange of looks was enough to set them off again.

‘This is idiotic,’ Michaud at last managed to say. ‘There’s nothing whatever to laugh at.’

‘No, but it’s so odd to think that you killed him.’

‘Nonsense! I haven’t killed anybody.’

‘What! Isn’t that what you’re laughing at? It’s what I’m laughing at anyway. I can so well see you uttering those mortal words, and the poor Colonel—no, I feel I shall start off again. Between ourselves, old boy, you must have a distinctly yellow streak in you. When I think of that unfortunate fellow who was so looking forward to his lecture! What exactly did you say to him?’

‘I said just what everybody else would have said in my place. That in the face of certain situations, one must adopt a certain attitude and stick to it, as a matter of dignity.’

‘But you yourself don’t care a hang? Two years ago, just before May, 1940, you told me that so far as you were concerned the honour of France could go down the drain.’

‘Yes, I did say it, and I shall probably say it again after the war. For the moment, I revere my country, and am ferociously jealous of her honour. Does that annoy you?’

‘Not at all,’ replied Lolivier. ‘You flutter from one opinion to another so gracefully that you compel my

admiration. As regards the honour of France, I fancy Colonel de Monboquin was a better judge of that than you are. He had always been an ardent and devoted son of his country, whereas your patriotism is just a caprice.'

'I wouldn't say that. My patriotism is deeply felt and realized. Since our defeat, it so happens that my country has become a home of inspiration where . . .'

'Now for the Lord's sake don't get on the high horse. Do you want me to tell you the truth? You've got no guts. You have spent your life dreaming and criticising, playing about with ideas without ever trying to equate them, or get them clear in your own mind. You couldn't become a Communist, you couldn't even remain in the Socialist Party. In the domain of realities you saw nothing but the mud and the potholes. Growing old, as you have done, in a sort of mental no man's land, you finally became disgusted with yourself. You were tired of wandering in pursuit of nothing, and you became more and more incapable of making a definite choice. Then, fortunately, came the defeat, and enabled you to extricate yourself from the void, and forget your impotence. You are a patriot, in accord with your own conscience and with all men of good-will. You breathe. You feel the earth again beneath your feet. The occupation, the humiliation of the intellect, the sufferings of the country, human dignity—you know what you are talking about at last. Suddenly you are sure of yourself. You can even flatten out a poor old fool, and consign him to his coffin in order to show him what true French archæology is. And quite right too. Make the most of a passing flash of youth. I am a patriot too, but in a stupid, physical sort of way. My country, my family, cousin Jules, old friends, and the memories of childhood, all this forms part of the same sentimental landscape. The defeat, cousin Jules' illness, an old friends' death, these are the troubles of

life. They distress me and I think about them, but I am still Etienne Lolivier, and I continue to believe that two and two make four.'

'What a fortunate temperament!' said Michaud sarcastically. 'A million and a half prisoners of war, France occupied, cousin Jules, Hitlerite Europe.'

'Don't be so gloomy, you old ape. Of course Hitlerite Europe is an almighty catastrophe. But I still live in the Rue Ramey. Except when I can enjoy your conversation, I live in the black tunnel of the cares and horrors of my life. If you had a hell like mine at home, you would perhaps begin to understand. I tell myself that the world is on fire: life for me is primarily the load of mud and misery that I drag through the darkness of my tunnel. The invasion of France, Hitler's and Churchill's speeches, the war in Russia—all this exists indeed; but life, real life, life as it is lived, is a house with a nagging wife in it, brawls and misery and hate, and a boy who spits in his father's face: it's the arrival home to find that your son has pawned the table-napkins, the thought of your daughter living at Toulon with a gangster, though you must mind what you say before friends because they have been told she is taking a finishing course at Lyon, when she's no better than a common tart, my boy: it's the nice little Sunday trip to Montreuil, to visit the parents, an old half-imbecile mother, and a rheumatic, snarling old father who complains that he's neglected and always wants another hundred francs. That is life. Roosevelt may smile in the heaven of our destinies, and Hitler may occupy Timbuctoo; I have my very own little life, which leaves me no time for dreaming.'

In a momentary access of weakness, Lolivier buried his head in his hands, and dropped his face on to the table. He raised it almost at once, and said with a smile:

'I'm a fool and an ingrate. I have the luck to have you

with me, morning and evening, and yet I complain. You can't imagine all I owe you. Without you I don't know how I should have got through these last ten years. But you are there, you always have something to give me, something that expands my heart and mind. I often feel ashamed—I'm such a nonentity, a second-rate shyster from the provinces, with a nasty temper and a taste for pompous argument. Yes, old boy, that's the truth. You see everything larger and finer than it is in nature, you always find a patch of sky to brighten up reality, and I, in a sort of pitiful envy, am always baiting and teasing you about that sky of yours. I was odious just now. Oh, yes, I was. And yet what a part you play, not only in my life but in my very self! When I am away from you I often say to myself: what would Michaud do? what would Michaud think? You have almost become my conscience.'

Michaud, much moved, protested that he did not deserve such confidence, that he was, like everybody else, capable of prejudice, injustice, weakness, blindness. All the same, he inwardly agreed that this confidence was not misplaced, and he regretfully thought that, attached as he was to his friends, Lolivier would never figure as his—Michaud's—conscience. The thought distressed him like an act of treachery. It tended to establish between them a distinction of quality to his own advantage. And, worse still, Lolivier was conscious of that distinction, and very ready to accept it.

'It is often a help to see things through another's eyes,' said Michaud.

'Which doesn't mean that the other person is particularly perspicacious. Come in!'

Eusèbe announced that Madame Lebon wanted to see M. Michaud, who told the boy to show her in. Lolivier went on with his work. When a visitor appeared in the office, it was understood that Michaud received him,

Lolivier figuring as his partner's secretary. This was a practice that had unconsciously grown up.

Lina entered with a dash that surprised Michaud as much as her garb. Her person was engulfed in an enormous shooting-jacket that had belonged to Warschau, and reached down to her calves. The cloth was so coarse and thick, that the shoulders lay in a rigid line that gave the tiny woman a strangely masculine appearance. She had turned up one of the sleeves in order to free her right hand, the left remained invisible. Her blue linen scarf rolled into a turban sheathed her face to the eyebrows so that little but the tip of her nose was visible, and she looked to Michaud rather like a pert peasant girl in an operetta.

'Pierre, excuse that I come without letting you know. I was afraid if I telephone, you tell me I come to-morrow or later. And I wanted so much to see you at once.'

'What's wrong?'

'I don't know how to say. And yet I feel that everything is bad for me. Pierre, I am afraid.'

'No need to be. You haven't heard anything that might mean trouble?'

'No, but I feel there is something in the house. I am afraid of the concierges. They won't talk to me now, they glare at me, I am so polite to them and they used to be polite to me. Now they look at me, and I see in their eyes I am a Jewess. There is a Colonel, too, in the house, perhaps you know he died this morning. Since three days he was for dying, and I was sorry. Perhaps I was a little pleased too. Colonels are not a good thing for Jews. But I was sorry. I meet his wife twice two days ago, in the street, you know, tall woman with a face. Always as usual I bow. Always she replies with a rather high smile. Two days ago, once she looks away, once she looks at me with such evil eyes, I thought she was going to insult me. And yesterday

on the staircase she poked me in the behind with her umbrella. I think on purpose.'

'Lina, you are getting worked up about nothing.'

'In the night I wake up and all around me is the forest in Poland. Thousands of trees I see, and on each a Jew is hanging. God will avenge, but I am afraid. And on the staircase I hear the noise of boots and rifles. Then my heart stops. I dare not move to open the light, and I am afraid to die of fear in the dark.'

'Nonsense—your papers are all in order. Neither the Gestapo nor the French police know of your existence. You have absolutely nothing to fear from anybody.'

Michaud appealed to his partner to confirm that Madame Lebon was in no danger, but Lolivier was much less emphatic. He surveyed the visitor with far from friendly eyes, and set himself to consider her position, discussing it with an almost offensive affectation of indifference.

'In principle, Madame Lebon is perfectly safe, since, according to her papers, she is an Aryan. In plain fact, the tenants and concierges in the Rue de Prony know that you are in M. Warschau's flat to save his furniture. They also know that you are related to his family. If anyone has a grudge against you, they may well give you trouble. As for the concierges, I fancy your rather eccentric dress may, among other things, have irritated them. It does not suit the flats.'

'My dress!' said Lina in astonishment. 'But why should the concierges object?'

'I don't know. It certainly marks you out from the other tenants. It is a detail, but one which, added to others, is not without importance. In your situation, you would do well not to make yourself conspicuous. If you want to pass for a respectable inhabitant of the Monceau district, you must dress and behave accordingly.'

‘Certainly,’ said Michaud, ‘but these are details. You are complicating a very simple problem. Madame Lebon . . .’

‘Pierre, you are a child,’ interjected Lina impatiently. ‘Let M. Lolivier speak. Please go on, Monsieur.’

‘The other day when the concierge called, you had not paid the last quarter?’

‘No, but the arrears I had paid to Michaud a fortnight ago. The arrears were so heavy, and I myself paid for . . .’

‘It’s the old story,’ interrupted Lolivier. ‘The position is that you settled with M. Michaud, but you gave nothing to the concierge, I understand? In fact you never give him anything?’

‘It is not an affair for me. Warschau, he should give, I am nothing.’

‘You are the tenant. It is to you that the concierge rightly looks for his perquisites, and not to Warschau, who is in Algeria or England. You don’t have to give him a penny, of course, but don’t come and complain if he doesn’t like you. One of these days when the police come into his lodge for one reason or another, he will say just a word too much about Warschau’s flat, and you’ll be for it.’

Michaud tried to intervene to soften the effect of his partner’s remarks. But the moment he began, she had shifted her chair so that she could no longer see Michaud, and gave her whole attention to Lolivier. Now and again she glanced over her shoulder at Michaud, and seemed surprised that he should be still taking part in the conversation. He made repeated attempts to interpose an encouraging word or two, but she finally succeeded in reducing him to silence.

‘You don’t know, Pierre, you are a child. Monsieur Lolivier, you say such useful things. You think I ought to do what with the concierge?’

‘Give him some money, and give it him at once. Slip

him a couple of thousand francs and everything will be all right.'

'Two thousand francs ! Nonsense ! That is a very great sum. Two thousand francs, I can't find so much.'

'Oh yes you can.'

'Good, I give. I hope they don't make faces at me any longer. But I think still there is the clothes. If I want to dress like the ladies of the house, frock, cloak, shoes, hat, all will cost the eyes from my head. And first, how do I find ?'

'What's the black market for ? People who live in a large flat in the Rue de Prony are, in fact, morally obliged to buy in the black market. By taking the trouble to bargain a bit, I fancy that you could buy a complete new outfit for a matter of twenty thousand francs, and be quite as smart as your neighbours.'

'No, I do not give. So much the worse for my clothes. And twenty thousand francs I have not got. Even the half I have not got, even the quarter.'

'I think you have, and more.'

'But I do not give. However, you are right, especially as Warschau, his wife and daughter were always so well dressed, with expensive jewels. And also the women who stayed with Warschau. Elsa Lang, Renée Warschau's sister-in-law, never have I seen more elegant woman. Paquin dresses, diamonds, I was ashamed for her.'

'In our block on the Rue Caulaincourt,' ventured Michaud, 'a family by the name of Lang have just been arrested. Emile Lang. His wife was taken away at the same time.'

'I know,' said Lina, her lips curling in contempt. 'A pair of dirty sods. Oh, I'm sorry. But they were so Parisian that I can't care much. They despised the real Jews, because they were no longer Jews, but only Parisian and French.'

And now it is God who punishes his people on account of Emile Lang and others who have turned their backs. Jews of Paris, I don't mind, they deserved it, but Jews of Poland, they are poor simple lambs hanging from trees, tortured, my sisters violated by soldiers, and I weep blood. You are right, I give two thousand francs to the concierge, and I buy shoes, dress, hat. I mean to be there on the day of vengeance when God will come back for us. But when I have given the money to the concierge, I want you to come to the Rue de Prony and talk to him for me.'

'If you think it would do any good, I'll go and talk to him,' said Michaud.

'No, not you, Pierre, I wish Monsieur Lolivier he come.'

Feeling rather mortified, Michaud plunged into his work, and ignored the rest of the conversation. He observed with bitterness that his sympathy and kindness were less valued by Lina than Lolivier's harsh words, and gave her less comfort. At the same time, he was astonished to find himself such a poor psychologist. He would never have supposed that his partner, speaking as he had done, could have produced such an effect. Obviously, he thought, I haven't begun to understand that little woman. She just thought me a fool. However, Lina's attempt to induce Lolivier to go and talk to the concierge in the Rue de Prony met with a flat refusal. When she pressed him, he looked at his watch and said curtly that he had no more time to lose. She gave him her hand and thanked him. Michaud, still feeling sore, contented himself with a nonchalant handshake, and set to work again. Lina did not seem to pay any attention to this altered attitude. It was Lolivier who conducted her to the door. When he came back, his partner, crimson in the face, was thundering at the secretary who had just brought him three sheets of typescript. Solange, stiff and straight beside him,

submitted to the avalanche with an air of indulgence and disgust.

‘This is about the limit!’ yelled Michaud. ‘The typists of to-day just can’t type three lines without scattering exclamation marks and dots all over the place. This is a memorandum for the Inland Revenue. If I were to read it according to your punctuation, I should have to declaim like an actor in a melodrama, or a ranting poet. I’m fed up with it. Rant away as much as you like when you’re having a romantic scene with your young man. Here we have to deal solely with tenants, landlords, and lawyers. Kindly get into your head that you’re not in this job to get any thrills out of it. What were you taught at school? You have forgotten every word of it apparently. You were taught that in French every sentence has a beginning, a middle and an end, and at the end comes a full stop. You were taught that when you write, “The margin of our taxable profits has been considerably reduced,” there is no need of hyper-poetical flourishes or a damned soulful row of dots. The revenue authorities don’t give a damn for your state of mind. At least I hope they don’t, for that’s by no means proved either. Soon people will be putting a row of dots after every column of figures. Literature is all over the place, making a mess of everything. You look at me as if I were talking Chinese, but it’s through these damned dots that a country loses a war, and a pack of imbeciles drags us down into defeat. That seems to astonish you, and yet it’s the bare truth—with a full stop at the end of it. Decaying energy soon skids into literature and balderdash. And poetry is helped out with dots. And everything flops, capsizes, and finally goes to hell.’

Michaud then launched into a tirade against wireless, press and cinema. Finally after an explosion of oaths, for which he most undeniably adopted the declamatory style,

he dismissed Solange with the order to recopy the memorandum to the Inland Revenue. Lolivier had gone back to his place and sat intent upon his work. A laborious silence descended upon the office. After half an hour, Michaud got up unobtrusively and went into the next room to dictate a letter to the secretary. He saw Eusèbe sobbing at the table and dared not ask any questions. No doubt Solange had followed his example, and vented her bad temper on the boy. Michaud felt rather rueful and embarrassed. She took advantage of this to press for an increase of pay, and he promised that he and his partner would consider it.

‘I’ll tell her where she gets off,’ said Lolivier a few minutes later.

He slipped his fountain pen into his pocket and got ready to go. He wanted to get round before twelve to the block of flats in the Rue Myrrha, from which several demand notes for rent had been returned unpaid two days before. Michaud pleaded the typist’s cause. In his view, the high cost of living justified her claim. She must certainly find it hard to make both ends meet.

‘Don’t we find it hard?’ asked Lolivier. ‘Have our incomes gone up? The truth is that, with your family to provide for, you earn much less than Solange. I don’t mean of course that she eats meat every day, but she is paid at the normal rate. You always want to go one better than what is practicable. One must after all take account of what devolves upon the Almighty. Your good will can’t provide everything. You must make up your mind to that. It’s the same with the tenants in the Rue Myrrha.’

The firm managed two blocks of flats in the Goutte d’Or district, one of them being in the Rue Myrrha. The flats were let to working-class families and since the invasion the firm had often had great difficulty in getting in the rents. Lolivier dealt with these flats personally, as experience had

shown that Michaud was too easily moved by a tale of woe, and lacked the indispensable authority of manner.

The market in the Rue Dejean, which used to keep the neighbouring streets in a state of animation until the early afternoon, had long since been dead. The rain, too, had chased away the few vendors of laces or cheap brushes, whose boxes had replaced, on the pavement edge, the luxuriant baskets of days gone by, brimming with fruit and vegetables. At midday the Rue Myrrha was almost deserted. Huddled against the wall in quest of shelter from the gusts of wind and rain, a double row of women and children stood in a restless queue at the door of a grocery, the shop window of which was empty. The tall, flat-fronted houses, almost all alike, with leprous white facades, looked like a makeshift backscene for a realistic play. Beneath the rain and lashing blasts of wind, the street had a fragile, sickly air. In the queue outside the grocer's shop, a stout lady wearing a scarf round her head recognized Lolivier from afar, and dispatched a little girl to give the alarm at home. He spotted the manoeuvre and made straight for the flats at top speed. Without stopping at the concierge's lodge, he dashed through the passage-way, clambered up two flights of stairs and knocked at a door. The tenant,¹ who was three quarters in arrears, pleaded his two children, his bedridden wife, and the cost of living.

¹ Andre Caseneuve, turner-mechanic, was called up in 1943 for forced labour and sent to a factory in Bavaria. Better fed than at home, and relieved from the cares of supporting a family, he acquired a taste for his new existence. He considered German methods of work superior to those he had known in France. German women seemed to him more attractive than French women, and distinctly more so than his own wife. However, Caseneuve did take part in the efforts at sabotage carried out by his group and just escaped deportation. As from July, 1944, he remained without news of his family for nearly a year, and discovered that he did not mind. Having learnt the language, he thought he could remain in Bavaria after the German defeat but his attempt failed and he was repatriated. Delighted to see his family once more he felt, however, as if he were getting back into harness after a long and pleasant holiday.

‘The rents haven’t gone up,’ retorted Lolivier. ‘You’ve been putting me off with this sort of story far too long, I can’t wait any longer.’

He threatened the tenant with eviction, and extracted three hundred francs on account, reflecting with sombre relish that he had again succeeded where his friend’s noble heart would infallibly have failed. Having visited all the defaulters in the block, he went up to the attic-storey. Taking a key from his pocket he cautiously opened one of the doors opening on to the corridor. The room he then entered was furnished with a mattress and two iron chairs. a bird cage was standing on the ledge of the dormer window. The stuffy little room was pervaded by a rather stale and sickly odour, which however he inhaled without dislike. Sitting down on one of the chairs, he remained for a moment motionless, until the white mouse, concealed between the mattress and the wall, finally decided to emerge. From the pocket of his overcoat he then produced a ham sandwich which he had cut for himself at home before leaving for the office, and began to eat his lunch. The white mouse came right up to his feet, to pick up the crumbs he dropped for her. Now and again she grew bolder, climbed on to the toe of his shoe, and would have perhaps clambered on to his knees and higher still if he had allowed her, but the idea of her pattering over his clothes filled him with revulsion. When his meal was finished, Lolivier sat watching the gambols of his little pet while he considered the improvements which would be necessary to enable him to take up his abode in this same attic, and there live a celibate existence. He had, in fact, not quite made up his mind, and was afraid of letting himself be duped by specious arguments. This attic solitude in this little animal’s company, seemed to him a wise man’s choice, and, as such, inspired him with a certain mistrust. He was not sure that tranquillity could replace the

heated atmosphere of his own home. On the other hand, he expected much from escape and oblivion. Having turned the problem over and over in his mind, he did what he had done on the previous day. Taking an envelope from his pocket, he read through, word by word, the letter that his son had sent him the day before.

‘My dear Papa—I am sorry to have left you in anxiety for so long, and I hasten to let you know that I am all right. For a week now I have been living in one of the most sordid streets in Paris, in a kind of cellar, sharing a bed with an Arab of about fifty and a fat girl called Lola. Lola and I work the pavements, each with our own beat, etc . . . ’

The monster described his existence with a wealth of foul details that left nothing to the imagination. Lolivier had read the letter a dozen times, and still tried to hope that the whole story was a fabrication.

IN the half-light of the staircase Malinier passed a tall emaciated silhouette which, from the stiff collar and white moustaches, he recognized as that of M. Coutelier.

‘Good morning,’ he said genially. ‘You can’t place me. We met one evening at Madame Grandmaison’s. I am that unworthy Frenchman whose head you bit off, you remember. Yes, I looked pretty silly that time.’

The recollection provoked Malinier to a burst of laughter, and he added as he tapped the ex-School Inspector on the shoulder: ‘But the lesson did me good: as you see.’

Now M. Coutelier saw nothing. He was short-sighted, and the staircase was very dark. However, he remembered Malinier and was glad to know that he had reverted to a saner view of human and political realities.

‘A little good faith and reflection always leads one to the truth,’ said he. ‘You are no doubt calling on Madame Grandmaison?’

‘I am going to say good-bye to her. She doesn’t know I’m coming, but I thought she would be at home at the beginning of the afternoon.’

‘I don’t think she has gone out. As a matter of fact I have a message for her. I will go with you to the door.’

Malinier stood aside to let the School Inspector pass. Attracted by the possible chance of propagating the good cause, the old man had no notion of stopping at the door and listening to a profession of faith. Chou welcomed the visitors and ushered them into the chromium boudoir where

Yvette was in conversation with Antoine and Tiercelin. The sky had cleared and the light of a bright afternoon flooded the room. M. Coutelier, who had entered first, thought he descried an expression of the surprise on the faces of the three young people. Turning his head, he uttered a cry as he discovered that Malinier was wearing German uniform.

‘Sir,’ he said, taking his stand in front of Yvette, ‘go away at once ! You are in the home of a French soldier, a prisoner in the hands of your paymasters. Get out !’

Malinier had turned a little pale. He eyed his boots, his green uniform of thick army serge, his decorations, and on his sleeve, the tricolour badge.

‘Let us make no mistake. If I am to-day wearing a German uniform, it is to atone for your misdeeds, so as to restore you the liberty you no longer deserve. In three days I am leaving for Russia, and my wife regards me as a lunatic, because I am going to die like a dog to fertilize a soil from which I shall reap no harvest. My concierge won’t speak to me, my friends turn their backs on me or spit when I pass. And I don’t feel particularly at ease in this get-up. But you sold your daughter to a Jew. You sold your country to the Jews, the Freemasons, the poets, and the Communists. They have turned it into what you see, and while you wash your hands of the result, I repair the damage, I pay cash down in my own blood. One day you will learn that I have left my bones in Russia, and have a good laugh about it.¹ You will

¹ Malinier was not destined to die in Russia. Taken prisoner by the Americans after the German collapse, he was handed over to the French authorities. In one of his successive prisons he was maltreated. From the account of an eye-witness : ‘In the evening the members of the L.V.F., stark naked, were lined up in the yard, and half stunned by blows with heavy sticks. They spent all night outside in the same condition, and their guards, nearly all of them young men, appeared from time to time and beat them again. During the same night I was awakened several times by a concert of yells. In the morning, before being removed to their cells, the guards forced them to roll in broken glass. I saw them from my window. The prison chaplain, who knew what was going on, pretended to be ignorant of

say :—So much the better, one true Frenchman the less, more room for the Jews. Except that there won't be any more Jews. They will all have been put away, or settled among the Kaffirs. Even semi-Jews will be castrated.'

M. Coutelier was so indignant that he first decided to meet this speech with a contemptuous silence. Unfortunately, since Lieutenant Malinier continued his tirade against the Jews and the Marxists the ex-School Inspector could not resist the urge to get the better of him, and uttered a stinging retort which was the start of an interminable dispute. Yvette and the two young men listened in rather bored silence. The debate hardly seemed to concern them. In general, their sympathies were with Malinier. It was not that his cause seemed to them better than that of M. Coutelier ; on the contrary, Antoine, in particular, was strongly biased against anti-Semitism and the spirit of collaboration, but together with Yvette and Paul, he rather took to this naïve and turbulent individual who had resigned himself to die far away in an unknown land. Compared with this ebullient personage, the old gentleman was so old, his collar was so stiff, that it was very difficult to like him. His arguments were marshalled with pedagogical exactitude, and he had, moreover, all the aggressiveness of the poor man who keeps a tally of his distresses. He never let it be forgotten that he was poor. He was a bore, and his discomfiture would have been welcomed. When Malinier talked of castrating the Jews, or employing poets on the work of draining cesspools, the young people laughed. Finally, the old gentleman lost his

it and may even have enjoyed it. I went to see him and told him what I thought of his failure to take action. I begged him to put an end to this ill-usage, and to the similar cruelties inflicted upon women. He promised me that the guards should be punished, and the prisoners humanely treated. I don't know what happened.' Malinier came up for trial in December and was condemned to death. In the course of the hearing he several times protested his patriotism, which at first amused the jury and then annoyed them.

temper when he realized that, instead of rallying to the party of justice, they were listening with complacency to the words of the traitor.

‘You must understand,’ he said, ‘that it is from hatred of your youth that this man has put on enemy uniform, to rid your hearts and minds of an entire inheritance of humanism and French civilization which should mould you into beings infinitely superior to the young robots of Hitlerite Prussianism.’

‘Superior!’ cried Malinier derisively. ‘As proved by the fact, I suppose, that they beat us!’

‘You hear that? He doesn’t even take the trouble to conceal his feelings of hatred and contempt for the youth of France. Anything fine and noble fills him with horror. He respects nothing but the brute in man, the machine constructed to make war, to kill, destroy, and torture.’

‘I am sorry, but the world is at war. What counts, and what has not ceased to count, is force. It’s very nice to spend one’s life messing around with girls and poets, but in a world of hard knocks that sort of thing doesn’t get you far. And I have it in my head that we’re in for hard knocks, a hundred years of hard knocks. What I would like to see in my country is a younger generation with plenty of muscle, no morality, and very little intelligence. As for the inheritance of our old French civilization—the Jews can have it, and they can take it with them to Kaffirland. If it gives them a taste for Racine, they can have him too. We French don’t need that sort of thing now.’

At these impious words M. Coutelier exclaimed in triumph and called the young people to witness the horrible degradation into which this Fascist officer had fallen. But this irreverence to Racine, far from scandalizing Paul and Antoine, rather appealed to them. A man capable of treating the divinities of the scholastic world so cavalierly inspired

them with a certain respect. Paul was particularly taken by this independence of mind, and deigned to break silence and congratulate Malinier.

‘He’s right,’ he said. ‘We are fed up with Racine.’

M. Coutelier was painfully abashed by Paul’s testimony, and realized that Fascism was in process of gaining ground. Descending into the depths of himself, beyond the domain of the stiff collar and his usual habits of thought, he discovered that he personally had no taste for Racine, although he was very ready, even while he realized it, to lay down his life for a line of *Britannicus*. Recalling all the admirers of Racine whom he had known, he suspected them of regarding the poet with the bleak and timorous respect felt by a clerk for his chief. In a flash he understood the prestige enjoyed by Malinier with the younger generation.

‘I see you admire this man because he dares to say that Racine bores him, you take ignorance for independence of mind. Like all his fellows, he despises what he does not know. I challenge him to quote the names of even three plays by Racine.’

To please his wife Malinier had, in the first year of his marriage, read the classical French drama with great assiduity. Unfortunately he could not remember the title of a single one of Racine’s plays. He flushed very red, and his neck swelled in his uniform collar. He was extremely mortified, and conscious of his false position. The ex-Inspector gloated over his embarrassment. He even indulged in the luxury of prompting him with the first syllable of *Bajazet*, and then the second. But this awakened no response in Malinier, who felt as downcast as though he had committed a crime. Yvette, who had passed her higher certificate and could have babbled about Racine for an hour by the clock, was shocked by such ignorance. Antoine and Paul were themselves embarrassed on Malinier’s behalf, and

withdrew some part of the respect he had acquired in their minds.

‘The case is at an end,’ declared M. Coutelier. ‘This man is no more qualified to talk about Racine than he is to judge of the honour of France and her interests. Take note that his position would be no stronger if he knew *Britannicus* or *Athalie* by heart.’

‘After all, it isn’t everybody that admires Racine,’ interjected Antoine.

‘That’s not the question,’ replied the Inspector. ‘A civilized man should be capable of fighting and dying for things he does not like. That is what Malinier will never be able to understand, any more than his friends our enemies. Like them, he is capable of laying down his life, but for a goddess or a ham, or anything else to which he is physically attached. He leaves his country and his family, he goes to Russia in quest of an arduous life and an ignominious death to serve a man whose monstrous countenance has struck his naïve imagination, and whom he worships as a child might do. Poor man, he is not altogether responsible, and would be an object of pity if . . .’

‘Supposing I bashed my fist into your face,’ said Malinier. ‘Should I be responsible?’

‘That’s just your sort of argument, but hardly suited to my age and station. I leave you the use of it. However, I must go, it’s four o’clock already. Sir, again I invite you to withdraw. Your presence here, in that livery, insults the distress of a decent woman who is mourning the absence of her life’s companion, exile in a Boche gaol.’

‘Is it true, Yvette, that you regard my presence as an insult?’

‘Indeed no, M. Coutelier exaggerates. I know you well enough to be sure that you are a sincere friend of my husband and that your uniform has in no way changed your feelings.’

This spirit of conciliation sickened M. Coutelier, who spoke sternly to Yvette for failing in her duty as a wife. He even went so far as to refer to her delinquencies, and implicated Antoine by name. Malinier grasped the intention of the charge and defended his friend Grandmaison's wife.

'No matter how much we may love our absent ones,' he said, 'nature will have her rights. That's how it is. My wife has been unfaithful to me for the last ten years, and I sleep at home every night. Indeed, I don't even worry about it any more.' And Malinier added nonchalantly: 'The important thing is not to sleep with a Jew.'

This time the old gentleman did not retort, he stalked out of the room without a word to anyone. While Chou was taking him to the door, Malinier said in an undertone:

'The old chap is right. The wife of a prisoner of war ought to remain irreproachable and not misbehave with a little squirt of sixteen. You needn't pretend that it's serious. I don't know what you've got in place of a heart, my boy. I daresay I'm capable of all sorts of things. But with the wife of a prisoner of war—no, never. It would revolt me. I know quite well that a lad doesn't think of these things, he's only too pleased to find a willing woman. Love is a fact that can't sometimes be evaded. All the same, you don't live together, do you?'

Antoine pretended not to take part in the conversation. He had taken to heart what Malinier had just said about him. Yvette was equally annoyed with the visitor for his comments on their relationship, and her first reaction had been to head him off the subject, but her angry expression suddenly cleared and her eyes filled with smiling good humour.

'Monsieur Malinier, we are such good friends that I should be ashamed not to tell you the whole truth. This is how we stand. Antoine, who usually lives with his parents,

has come to stay with me for the Easter holidays. His family know nothing about it, of course, and believe he is spending his holidays in Burgundy with his friend Paul here. So Antoine came to me on Saturday evening and must leave on the day on which he is supposed to come back from his holiday, which is Wednesday next. So far, you see, the situation is simple. But it is complicated by the fact that we love each other more than I can tell you : desperately, Monsieur Malinier—that is the word. And as you were saying just now, love is a fact that people can't evade.'

'I did certainly say so, and I don't go back on it, but all the same that isn't a reason . . .'

'Monsieur Malinier, that was a true word you spoke—very true. Antoine and I have been living together for five days, and we now understand that we can't ever live without each other again. If we had to part now it would be worse than death for us, and as for me, I wouldn't have the strength to go on living.'

'You're bringing tears to my eyes. And what about the prisoners? Don't they suffer too from being parted from their dear ones?'

'I daresay. But they don't die of it. If I had to live apart from Antoine I should die. Don't talk to me of duty or morality. I only know one thing, and that is that Antoine must stay with me and never leave me again. You have too much sense and feeling, Monsieur Malinier, not to understand.'

Malinier agreed with some complacency that he was a man of sense and feeling, but was not to be drawn on the essential point. Yvette took his hands, shed a few tears, and pointed out that he could not expect a higher level of morality from her than from his own wife. As, after all, it was merely a question of easing up on a principle. Malinier finally gave way.

'I knew I could count on your friendship,' cried Yvette, flinging her arms round his neck. 'You are the only person in the world from whom I could expect so much understanding and kindness. This is what you must please do: you must go to Antoine's parents, wearing the uniform of an officer in the Gestapo. You will, of course, be told that he is away. You will insist on seeing over the flat, and you will go away looking suspicious and dissatisfied, and muttering a few threats. Next day Antoine will have a letter conveyed to his father explaining that he is wanted by the police and that he is obliged to go into hiding with reliable friends, whose address he cannot give.'

'Nothing doing,' said Malinier flatly: he had been wagging his head vigorously while listening to the proposal.

'What are you afraid of? There's no risk to you at all. You will have fixed the whole thing up in ten minutes.'

'I'm not afraid, but I won't do it. A man of my age, father of three children, can't lend himself to that sort of thing. That's a schoolboy dodge. When I put on this uniform it was to defend the French against Communists, Jews, poets, Cubists, and the English, not to terrorize people. Besides, I must also think of Grandmaison. What would he say if he knew his old pal Malinier had played a trick like that? No—can't be done.'

'So you won't do anything for me! You're not a real friend. It's easy to find reasons for not doing a kindness when the truth is you don't want to.'

Yvette sobbed into her handkerchief and announced that there was nothing left for her to do but die. Her parents had married her against her will to a man she did not love. Now, when life seemed about to smile upon her, and banish the sad years of the past, she found herself surrounded by hostile faces, false friends determined to stand in her way and destroy her happiness. Despair became her. The anguished

look in her tearful eyes was extremely moving. Malinier ceased to defend himself.

‘Life is an odd business,’ he lamented. ‘Here am I, devoted to my country, wearing the baldheads’ uniform, and about to do the dirty on my old pal Grandmaison. What it all boils down to is that it doesn’t do to be conquered, or a prisoner of war. Get that into your heads, you lads. At your age you should be thinking of nothing but machine-guns and hand-grenades. I’m not blaming you, Yvette, but the fact is, women are just like poetry : all they’re good for is to give you ideas in your guts. You’re going to set up house with that young chap, eh? Have you ever even considered how you are going to live?’

‘Antoine has found a job already,’ answered Yvette. ‘Don’t you worry about that, Monsieur Malinier. If we can be together we shall manage all right. The essential thing is that you should do your little bit. When can you go and see Antoine’s parents?’

‘Well, as I’m going that way, I could call in now.’

‘I would much sooner you called at dinner time when my father will be there. At this time of day my mother is alone in the flat.’

Malinier had an engagement for that evening and it was agreed that he should go and see Antoine’s parents on the following day between seven and eight o’clock. When he left the Rue Berthe he would drop in at the Rue Durantin to give an account of his expedition, and they would all dine together at the *Pomme d’Adam*. It occurred to Yvette to get him to rehearse his role as a policeman, which proved a by no means useless precaution, as he was far from brilliant in the part. His tone was too familiar, and the uniform did not compensate for his rather casual demeanour.

‘I appear at the door. I say : Are you the parents of young Antoine Michaud? I have orders to take him to the

Kommandantur. There's been some dirty work hereabouts

'No, no—you must be short and sharp. Above all, you must speak very correct French, making a little mistake now and again. Not a word of slang, and don't forget the accent.'

After half an hour of effort Malinier could impersonate a presentable German officer. His role had amused him in the end and he departed with the determination to do himself credit. When she was alone with her friends Yvette flung her arms round Antoine and congratulated herself on her timely inspiration. Paul looked coldly on at these effusions of joy, waited until they had subsided, and then, addressing himself to Yvette, said in a stern voice :

'If you could understand what you have just done, you would perhaps be less pleased with yourself. Thanks to this notion of yours, Antoine will never be able to set foot in the Lycée again, or pass his certificate in July. As the war may easily last five years or more, he will be obliged to give up his studies. He is sixteen. Look at him carefully : a delicate little head, gentle eyes, fragile wrists. What will he do in life without a diploma ? Diplomas, classical Greek, academic ideas, high-brow conversation, are just the programme for nice lads like him. Outside that environment, what will he become ? A clerk in a bank ? He'll never stand it. Eight hours' office work, his nose in his ledger, and the chief cashier's eye on the back of his neck, that's not a job that Antoine could ever hold, and he knows it perfectly well. Besides, he wouldn't earn enough money for you.'

'If there's anybody who doesn't give a damn for money, it's myself,' declared Yvette. 'And in case of need I'm perfectly ready to work. In fact, I've been thinking seriously about it already.'

'Oh, cut that out ! It doesn't help, and doesn't kid any-

one. Everything I have just said is just as much in your interest as Antoine's. I know what you think and what you hope. You love Antoine perhaps more than you've ever loved a man, but you know yourself well enough to know that you won't love him for ever. He's as charming as a girl, he's gentle, he knows how to keep things light and lively between the two of you, and he has a head on his shoulders. He'll write the letters to the prisoner of war, and the orders to the dairy. He's got good taste, too : I adore that blue—it suits you *so* well. You may have three years of him, even five or six, before the war ends and the prisoner comes home. But when that happens, even if you're still a bit in love, the whole thing goes into reverse. It's bound to : the husband has come home ; he takes his place again beside his wife and daughter, and anyway, Antoine is twenty, and he may have to serve his time. That's the way life is. You adore Antoine now, but not as a permanency. In fact, you think it's rather tactless even to mention the future. As long as you've got your hooks into him now, the future can take care of itself. That's right, isn't it ?'

Yvette protested vehemently, and in tones of anguished sincerity that quite upset Antoine and touched him deeply, without, however, dispelling the doubts which his friend's plain statement had aroused in his mind. Quite impervious to all this, Paul Tiercelin coldly waited for the opportunity to continue.

'Let's say I exaggerate,' said he. 'Let's say that you have thought no more of your own future than of Antoine's. In any case, you count on spending several years with him before the war comes to an end and your husband comes back. And mind you, even—and especially—if you haven't thought about it, you reckon to live on the thirty or forty thousand a month he makes on the black market. But what you don't know is that that racket isn't going on much

longer. Escartel was arrested this morning about twelve o'clock. I think it was Flora who denounced him in the hope of getting me pinched. Escartel is a very small man, but when the police have gone over him he may well put them on the track. In any case, the big noises on the job will be on the alert. From what my father has told me, they have practically decided to clear out and operate elsewhere, and even if they stay in Paris they will certainly give up this district. We have three more weeks to live on our stock, getting rid of it at the usual rate. And then ?'

Yvette was very much taken aback and could not conceal her anxiety. Antoine put a better face on it. He was indeed more concerned about Yvette's reactions than the prospect of short commons. None the less, he saw vaguely alarming vistas ahead, and felt the awakening within him of a still undefined dread which was not the fear of failure. Hitherto, the idea of the future had never occupied his mind. Ever since he had dreamed of the joy of setting up house with Yvette, he had seen the future as a block of time, smooth and unrelieved, starting from the day when his decision was taken. Tiercelin's words now brought it before him as a succession of accidents and isolated points, and he began to regret his childhood days.

'All the same,' observed Yvette, 'Antoine will keep a connection of his own. He need only get the stuff elsewhere. And that's not difficult in these days.'

'Antoine hasn't got a connection,' retorted Paul. 'A place was made for him in an already organized circuit, in which he was just one agent among others. If he can get any stuff elsewhere, he will have to make up a connection of his own, and I don't think he is equal to that. In a fortnight, when funds are beginning to run out, you'll both be trailing round the bars in search of a little evening-dress job. With any luck, Antoine may be taken

on at a night-club to announce the turns, amuse the old hags, and keep up the sale of champagne. He will do a little black market work on commission, sell a little dope, and sleep with the girls of the establishment. In three months you will have quarrelled. Now that isn't what either of you want. Then why upset Antoine's life, make him give up the work he's good at, simply to turn him into a bogus tough who will never be at home in the sort of world in which he must earn his living? You have nothing to gain and everything to lose. It would be so simple to go on seeing each other as you did before the holidays. An hour every day—wasn't that enough for you?'

Paul let his friends reflect for a moment on the reasonableness of reason. Side by side on the divan, Yvette and Antoine sat with eyes downcast, each intent upon their separate reflections. They were careful not to touch. Their brooding faces were hard and sullen, as though they were thinking solely of themselves. So much so, that Paul thought for an instant that they were going back on their decision. But Yvette having reminded them that they were to see a film on the Champs-Élysées, got up, and pressed Antoine's hand in hers. As she went out, she turned in the doorway, and flung him a smile and a languorous look. Her wrap was open and exposed her thighs. The door closed, Antoine was left sitting with bent head, and his eyes fixed upon his clasped hands.

'Of course,' said Paul, 'she doesn't care a damn what happens. She knows she'll always fall on her feet. But for you it's different. Really, if you chuck your exam, you'll be running an awful risk. And even that isn't the worst. A lucky chance may put things right, although it looks pretty unlikely. What is serious in quite a different way, and really worries me more than anything, is the certainty of seeing you go to bits in a miserable little liaison from which you

will emerge in three years, washed up for the rest of your life.'

Antoine turned towards him with a look of comprehension but at the same time indifferent and faintly ironical, that convinced him that his efforts were hopeless.

'Well, I won't go on. You seem to be already in exactly the state I expected to find you in after a year's liaison. At one time you really had the makings of something. However, since you have decided to hand yourself over to Yvette, let us consider more practical matters. What I told you just now is true. The combine has cracked up, and in three weeks you won't be making a penny. In view of my father's influence, I shan't worry. You needn't worry either. No one knows your name, and the people you have dealt with, including Escartel, take you for an agent of my father's. Still, we must make our livings. Fortunately I managed to pick up that coffin job on excellent terms, and as it doesn't come from the same source as our usual stuff I could go through with it without any risk. In the course of yesterday evening and this morning Ozurian should have resold the whole lot, and done devilish well out of it, if I know him. To-morrow, or at latest on the day after, all the coffins will be removed and the money paid over to us at once. Half will of course be yours, quite a nice little packet : a cool seven hundred and fifty thousand francs.'

Antoine, flushed with amazement, leapt off the divan and danced round the room in an access of delight which much amused Paul, and dispelled his depression.

'That's frightfully nice of you,' said Antoine when he had laughed and danced himself to a standstill, 'but I feel a bit awkward about it. You did the work. There is no reason why you should share with me.'

'Not at all, it was you who fixed the actual deal. I just picked it up at the end. You have every right to your share

in the profits. But don't fail to remember that this job came to us by a bit of luck that won't happen again. With seven hundred and fifty thousand francs Yvette and you could live quietly for two years, on condition that you don't let her handle the money, of course. In fact, if you have any guts left, you could quite easily go on with your studies during those two years.'

Antoine agreed without much enthusiasm, and remarked that in any case he could not pass his examinations.

'You really think it so important that I should go on at the Lycée?'

'Surely you realize that if you don't, you will never be more than half-baked. You are a hothouse plant. Classical culture, the imperfect subjunctive and all the rest of it, is your armour and support. If you grow in open country, you will never be more than a poor anæmic little sensitive plant. Still, what does it matter? Now that you're a wash-out, it's too late for bellyaching over what might have been. By the way, I don't mind telling you that I don't much care for school work myself. Not from idleness, because I'm quite able to work without taking any interest in what I'm doing. But I'm not a hothouse plant, and I feel that school work stops my growth. Besides, when I meet very learned people, I get in a blue funk I may become like them one day. Apart from the fact that there's generally something a bit offensive about them, their manners, if you leave off the gloss, put me in mind of underworld types—well-to-do pimps, and so on. Like them, they have their own passwords and dialect, and a contempt for people who aren't in the ring, and don't know the code. They even have their own tattoo-marks, but not on their arms or chests: that wouldn't be conspicuous enough. Even at the Lycée the fellows of our age aren't particularly inviting. What reassures me is that they nearly all detest me. I tell myself

that I am not one of them, and that they feel it. In fact, I'm pretty sure that if you went on with your studies, in two or three years you would be intolerable. However I shall take the Certif. at the end of the year, because it will please my father very much if I bring it off, but I shan't go back to the Lycée in October.'

Antoine listened to all this with amused interest, admitting an element of truth in it, but secretly he was rather shocked. He felt he was in the other camp, the learned camp. But although Paul explained his aversions clearly enough, he did not say to which camp he belonged. When questioned on this point, he replied with some embarrassment :

'I don't know exactly, or rather I don't know how to express it. Perhaps, too, I don't feel at ease in any environment. What bothers me at the Lycée, and among learned people, is all the blasted footlement and hocus-pocus that goes with it. Before you find anything solid to get your teeth into you have to wade through a mass of futilities and superfluities, all trotted out as though they were of the highest importance, that put you off going any further. That's what I can't stand about women, too, and it's what disgusted me with Flora. A woman is, at bottom, very much like a man. The opposition of the sexes ought simply to be a means to a directer understanding. But they've only got to have a pretty face, or a good figure, or a presentable frock, and they twist themselves into such a mass of complications that you can't find the creatures at all. But perhaps I'm wrong to say that. Man or woman, a human being always ends by discovering that he belongs to a category, a clan, some particular species, with its own affectations, ceremonial and antics. I find that annoying, but there it is. All the same, I do think that there are situations, circumstances in which people become much more endurable. I was thinking so just now when that fellow

from the L.V.F. was here. He's a bit narrow, of course, but he gave me the impression of being sincere and honest, and never trying to appear other than he is.'

'But what do you intend to do in October?' asked Antoine.

'Well, that's just it. I have been hearing a good deal lately about a force of armed volunteers that is being formed somewhere in Central France, the aim being to train men for attacks on German convoys and isolated posts. It is a kind of life and society that I know I should like. But now I feel much drawn to the L.V.F. To fight in Russia with men of Malinier's type wouldn't be a bad thing either. The trouble is that to join that outfit the paternal consent is probably needed, and I know my father wouldn't give it, whereas to join the others, I shouldn't need anyone's permission.

As he crossed the Place Pigalle at what was, for him, a very unusual hour, Michaud reflected that since the occupation, he had not been out of doors after dinner more than five or six times. Then, as now, he had walked through darkened streets, past blocks of blinded buildings, without a glimpse of the nocturnal life of Paris. He could see just about as much from his own home, by lifting a corner of the black-out curtain. And during the daytime his field of vision was hardly wider. Except for a few expeditions on the underground, his daily life did not reach beyond a narrow sector which overlapped two of the city districts. He could not have stated the price of eggs, characteristic as this was of life in Paris under the occupation. He did not know the name of the Prefect of the Seine, or the number of ounces of fats which he could claim ; he could not recognize a S.S. man by his uniform, or tell the rank of an officer by his shoulder-straps. He had never been present at the midday march past of the troops down the Champs-Élysées, nor had he ever been searched by the French police, or the German gendarmerie. Had he suddenly found himself transported to New York, he would have been hard put to it to give the Americans any very detailed information about life in Paris. The newspapers over there would doubtless have told him much more than he himself knew.

None the less, he was certainly familiar with its essentials. The life of Paris had, for him, a colour, taste and perfume, combined with other and more diffused sensations. Some-

times, but more rarely, it could be concentrated into the aspect of a plastic and abstract form, which he rediscovered at long intervals in his dreams, and again, during his waking hours, in the shape of an idea or an image quite unconnected with it. Alarmed at first by the narrowness of his experience and knowledge, he promptly reassured himself with the thought of this range of sensations which did indicate a deep and intimate acquaintance with his age. He then remembered that the Hundred Years War and the Revolution, in which he had not indeed taken part, aroused in him other and equally specific ranges of sensations. Then he thought of his left foot. A sort of bunion had formed on his great toe, between the joints, which from time to time caused him acute pain. It was not a corn. Hélène, whom he had consulted, had insisted that it was a corn. But it wasn't a corn. Michaud was absolutely sure of this. Besides he had often had occasion to observe that women knew nothing about men's feet.

As he was walking down the Rue Pigalle, a soft voice called to him in the darkness. Doubtless the woman had known from the footstep that he was a man. A form brushed against him, a light hand was laid on the sleeve of his overcoat, and the voice said: 'Come along, darling.' Michaud answered roughly that he hadn't time. 'It won't take long,' said the soft voice insistently. A tousled head of hair, which felt youthful, brushed against his chin. Resolutely Michaud thrust the girl aside, and strode on, but the hair and the voice left a lingering regret. He envied men who spent their time amusing themselves, and had nothing else to think of but their own enjoyment. 'To be born rich,' he reflected, 'or with the gift of making money, and to devote oneself entirely to women and amusement, is a very inoffensive sort of life, whatever a pack of rheumatic moralists may say. If, instead of pursuing ideas and high

ambitions, and ending up as an ineffective intellectual, I had spent my best years in running after women, I should now be an old rip in no way disillusioned by events. The world war, the fall of France, the occupation, Fascism, Hitler's speeches, and Vichy politics, would be for me no more than headlines in a newspaper. There would always be girls and champagne. When there was a great battle on the Russian front, I should just smile and think of women's legs and faces. Alas, I am not an old rip, I do think of the Russian front ; I think of what may happen to-morrow ; and I don't smile.'

It was half-past nine, and most of the clients were still dining. Many of them had only just begun. At certain tables, *foie gras* was being served, and game at others. Notwithstanding Michaud's tall, broad-shouldered form, his arrival attracted no attention from the staff. A few of the clients noticed his worn overcoat, his faded hat and his ragged necktie. There was no malice in their looks, but they wondered what he could be doing in a place of this sort where, as was obvious, his means did not permit him to dine. Feeling rather nervous he took off his hat, and after a moment's hesitation, decided to approach a waiter, who proved quite polite and affable.

' I came in before dinner to see M. Tiercelin, but he was not here. I was told I might very likely catch him this evening.'

' M. Tiercelin has just gone down into the bar. He will be up very soon, but if you want to talk to him, you will be quieter in the bar than here.'

M. Tiercelin was at the far end of the bar where he was engaged in conversation with a stout lady enveloped in silver fox furs, and wearing heavy gold jewellery. Michaud asked the barman to tell him that the father of Antoine Michaud, his son's friend, was here.

‘A silly business,’ said M. Tiercelin, explaining the matter to the stout lady, who was his sister. ‘His son is in Paul’s class at school. You know him, you saw him here the day before yesterday. His name is Antoine, he is having an affair with Yvette, the girl that Calam tried to get hold of last year. You remember, he wanted to put her in your establishment. Well, the lad has told his father that he is going to spend the Easter holidays with Paul in Burgundy, when as a matter of fact he is spending them with Yvette. The father has never set foot in this place before, and now he just turns up unannounced. I wonder what’s up. Perhaps he suspects, perhaps he has heard something. I don’t know. What on earth am I to say? I can’t give the lad away.’

‘Behave as though you don’t know anything. If he says the boys aren’t in Burgundy, you must pretend to be astonished, and very indignant.’

‘Yes, that’s all I can do, but I don’t like it. I feel there ought to be a certain solidarity between fathers of families.’

‘Don’t be a goat,’ said his sister. ‘You’ve only got to look at the man: an honest employee, that’s what he is. One of the world’s workers, and without a bean.’

‘Don’t talk like that, Lucette, you’re being common. He may look rather simple, but he has a university degree. You don’t realize, a degree is far superior to a Certificate. A worker, very likely, and very likely without a bean, but I respect intelligence. In my opinion humanity needs people like that just as much as it needs people like you and me.’

Lucette threw a sidelong glance at Michaud, who was sitting rather precariously on the edge of one of the long seats. In sisterly loyalty, she did her best to think well of him, but she could not rid herself of a doubt.

'I don't deny that humanity needs such people. I know that neither you nor Fredo can invent mechanical dodges, or write in the newspapers. Still, these people aren't very amusing.'

'Well, I've known some who had a good deal of conversation, and knew just how to talk to women. I remember the year I went to Niort to lend Gustave a hand, one of the clients was a revenue official. Believe me, he kept all the girls amused. And when he wanted one, he got her for nothing! He was promoted while I was there. Now I must go and talk to the lad's father. When you go up tell Rita to post someone at the top of the stair, to tell Antoine, if he comes, that his father is here.'

M. Tiercelin had already taken three steps towards Michaud, when he thought of something and came back to his sister.

'Tell Fredo to drop Captain Klest's affair. I have just received reliable information that the Germans have only got enough petrol for two months. The English will certainly be in Paris by August. This isn't the moment to be in with German officers, especially a woman in a conspicuous position like yours. On that point I agree with Carette: it is always useful to be a good Frenchman. The old country may take a knock sometimes, as at present, but she'll come out all right in the end.'

Michaud was looking idly at the company in the bar. The men interested him more than the women, whom he barely noticed. He had always had a prejudice against the girls who frequented bars and cafés. They were, he thought, intent only upon the present minute, in quest of a mirror in the eyes of the clientèle. Men, on the contrary, especially when alone, looked as though they had come to get some information about life, to extract its secret. He liked the look of most of them, but one in particular attracted his

attention. This was a stout bald man,¹ still young, with a rather bulbous cranium, and bushy eyebrows. Sitting at the bar, he was warming a glass of brandy with both hands, and eying the gleaming liquid with an air of profound gloom. Suddenly he raised his glass with an abrupt, almost violent gesture, swallowed a mouthful of the brandy, and said to the barman as he put down his glass: 'I've got a bloody awful cold in the head.' There were undertones of such nobility in his voice that Michaud continued to regard him with respect. However, M. Tiercelin had now come up, and after politely introducing himself, led Michaud to a secluded table where they could talk undisturbed. Michaud who had as carefully observed the unknown man with the bulbous cranium, paid little attention to the appearance of his host, and did not even notice the rather formidable quality of that hard, dry countenance, and the ominous glitter in the narrow eyes. M. Tiercelin, for his part, examined him coolly, and had already realized the sort of man with whom he had to deal. He ordered drinks, and contented himself with commonplace courtesies until his visitor opened up the conversation.

'You will think me very remiss in not having come to see you before,' said Michaud: 'I have been meaning to come for a long while, but I have been much occupied. What with my business, my wife's illness, and the children, I don't get a moment to myself. But I do want to tell you how touched I have been by your kindness to Antoine.'

¹ The bald man, an ardent Petainist, was the victim of mistaken identity in October, 1943, and arrested by the Gestapo. After having been tortured, he was sent to Buchenwald, where he died in the month of January in the following circumstances which were reported to me by a witness. The bald man was one of a section placed under the orders of a Pole who, with the authorization of the Germans, every morning chose at random five or six men under his control, and killed them before breakfast, either by shooting them with a revolver, or thrashing them to death with a bull's-sinew whip. Having a swelling on his cheek which displeased the Pole, the bald man was thrashed to death.

This holiday in Burgundy is evidently doing him a world of good. You must have taken a great deal of trouble . . .’

‘Not at all,’ protested M. Tiercelin. ‘It was perfectly simple, and Paul was only too glad to be able to take his friend with him. I myself like Antoine very much, and I have always encouraged Paul to see as much of him as he could. He is an intelligent, friendly lad, and—what I most respect in him—he is steady. I always like young people when they are steady and conscientious. Unfortunately the war has done them a great deal of harm. We are confronted at the moment with a moral crisis not generally realized, and I am the more pleased that Paul’s best friend should be a boy like yours.’

‘Antoine is not at all a bad boy,’ said Michaud : ‘but I am not at all sure that he deserves all that you say. Anyway, his mother has her doubts and anxieties about him, and without being as pessimistic as she is, I have been wondering whether there isn’t something wrong. I may say that this morning, at the same time as Antoine’s letter, we received his marks and report from the Lycée, and they were not at all satisfactory. That is not in itself of any great importance, but hitherto Antoine had been—I say it frankly—remarkably good at his work, and this sudden failure can’t be merely accidental. His mother thinks there’s a love-affair behind it. She had already guessed something of the kind, and I ought to say that the more I think of it, the more I feel convinced that she is right. I wonder if you have had any suspicions of this kind about your son, or if, in Antoine’s case, you have noticed anything that might explain matters.’

‘If I had had any suspicions, Monsieur Michaud, you may be sure I would not have waited for your visit before letting you know. Of course, I can’t be certain, but I should be very much surprised if anything of the kind had happened

in my son's case. In the first place, I may tell you that I put him on his guard against the danger of going with women when too young. On his fourteenth birthday, I told him all about it, from A to Z.'

'Yes,' said Michaud, 'that's one way. I don't know how far it can be effective. The mere fact of discussing these things destroys in a boy's mind that mysterious dread, that unreasoning horror of sin which his parents' silence has created and maintained: you have abolished the mystic gulf between him and temptation, which you thereby reduce to a simple calculation of physiological inconveniences. You transform a moral into a hygienic problem, of which a boy may well find a practical solution. That is a serious matter. On the other hand, if the fear of infection is sufficient to restrain him, there is a risk of putting some very undesirable complexes into his mind.'

Michaud enlarged on the precautions with which such a subject should be treated in the presence of a boy. M. Tiercelin was appalled by the subtleties and scruples which beset educated persons in such simple matters. 'I have often thought it odd,' he reflected, 'that with all their education these people never get anywhere; but how on earth can they take care of themselves when they are in the habit of asking so many questions over a paltry little matter of a boy's trouser-buttons?' Meanwhile Michaud plunged into a flow of argument and refutations and demonstrations, referring rather indiscreetly to Rousseau and Freud, and quite losing sight of his first contention. M. Tiercelin grew pale with boredom, so much so that he discreetly invited a few friends to come and sit at their table. Michaud, when he had concluded a brilliant discourse on sexual realism, and its connections with the revolutionary spirit, noticed that he was surrounded by a numerous company, and that he had a large glass of champagne in front of him. The

conversation had not unnaturally dropped into an exchange of highly-flavoured anecdote. He did not dislike stories of this kind provided they were told among men. The presence of a feminine element, however, quite upset him. Beside him sat a very personable young woman, called Olga, who told several particularly startling anecdotes, dwelling on coarse words with embarrassing complacency. None the less, as she leaned against his shoulder and laid a casual hand on his thigh, he began to think better of her with more indulgence, and finally found her quite amusing. M. Tiercelin followed Olga's manœuvres with discreet attention. Her repertory exhausted, she suddenly seemed to droop, snuggled up to her neighbour, and let her head fall into the hollow of his shoulder. Her thick, heavily perfumed russet hair, tickled his neck and cheek.

‘You must excuse her, Monsieur Michaud,’ said Tiercelin. ‘Olga is a good little girl, but if she takes to anyone she can’t conceal it, not if he were the King of England. Olga, do leave M. Michaud alone. What on earth will he think of you?’

These last words seemed to startle Olga. Like a child caught in some misdeed, she sat up, and looking anxiously at Michaud, faltered softly. ‘Have I really shocked you?’ Michaud, in a slightly thickened voice, protested that she had done nothing of the kind, and assured her that he too liked her very much. She heaved a sigh of relief, and coming yet closer to him, again laid her head on his shoulder. M. Tiercelin seemed to think so little of this familiarity that Michaud did not feel any great discomfort. He was in fact anxious to appear at his ease, in order to conceal a certain stirring of his emotions. Affecting a bored detachment towards the temptations of the flesh, he pretended to stroke Olga’s hair with the casual air of a man used to such encounters, while he listened to what the man opposite was saying :

a man of about fifty, with short grey hair parted at the side, and exposing a considerable expanse of cranium. He had an intelligent face and talked with a barely perceptible foreign accent, which Michaud barely heeded. He was rather clever at unmasking the weaknesses and contradictions in his opponent's argument, and did so with much tact and good humour. They began with children's education, and agreed at first on the need for preparing them to take their place in society. But Michaud soon realized, from what his neighbour did not say, that the latter's attitude of mind differed from, and indeed was quite opposed to his own. However, the man did not give himself away, he followed Michaud on to his own ground, setting traps for him with a kind of friendly diffidence as though he felt conscientiously obliged to question a view they both shared. Michaud defended himself rather feebly, for the interest he now took in the conversation did not divert his attention from Olga, whose behaviour, now more obviously affectionate, rather cramped his style, and robbed him of his usual readiness of mind. She squeezed his hand and kissed it, or crushed her face against his cheek. Excited and pleased, but without surprise at Olga's marked preference for him, he took pains to respond to these demonstrations. Olga kept pouring out champagne and making him drink out of her glass. He sat quite unperturbed as he felt it go to his head and invade his flesh with a faint, insidious and wholly delightful intoxication.

While the two men were arguing, M. Tiercelin left the table, and after a few words with the barman, made his way out. At the top of the staircase he found Yvette, Antoine, and Paul, who had been waiting there for several minutes. Antoine was in a state of consternation, his eyes were bright with anguish, and his lower lip was trembling. Yvette was vainly trying to reassure him. Her efforts merely upset him all the more.

‘Don’t you worry,’ said M. Tiercelin. ‘It’s quite all right. Your father thinks you are in the country with Paul. Only he is rather vexed about your school report that reached him this morning, and he is wondering whether his boy hasn’t got a girl-friend tucked away somewhere. I have of course reassured him. We are on the best of terms already, and I rather think that in a week’s time or perhaps less, Papa Michaud won’t be quite so severe on his son. Just you leave it to me.’

M. Tiercelin laughed, a rather chilly and ominous little laugh.

‘What is happening?’

‘Nothing. What on earth should happen? Antoine’s father is discussing education with one of my customers. I admit I don’t altogether agree with his views. Everyone has his own method. The results are what matter, but this isn’t the moment to discuss the point. You had better go home to bed. Your father will be going home by-and-by, quite easy in his mind, and he won’t bother any more about his son’s behaviour. Now then, off with you! What should I look like if you were caught here? Good night.’

M. Tiercelin pushed the three young people towards the door, and walked slowly downstairs to give himself time to think. He was still struck by Paul’s attitude, and his look of suspicion, in which he had caught a glimpse of anxiety and something like reproach. For a moment or two he hesitated on the line he should take with Michaud, but he listened to the voice of caution. ‘After all,’ he thought, ‘Paul will never know. If the lad’s escapade does come to light later on, and the father is annoyed with me, it is just as well to be forearmed.’ When he got back to the bar, Michaud’s dispute had taken a more definitely political turn. From both sides came the words—Democracy, National-Socialism, Liberty, and the State. Michaud,

whose eyes were blazing, was now confronted by an open, though calm and smiling adversary. M. Tiercelin, fearful that some offensive word might provoke an explosion of patriotism, good-humouredly intervened :

‘Come, Monsieur Michaud, you don’t need to explain National-Socialism to a German Officer.’

Michaud could not disguise his surprise at finding himself confronted by a German officer, and looked at him wide-eyed.

‘Captain Hatzfeld,’¹ said the officer, ‘I apologize for not having introduced myself just now, but the charm of these Paris bars is that one can talk so freely, and without minding the proprieties.’

‘A German officer wouldn’t need to bother about the proprieties,’ observed Michaud drily.

The officer’s face darkened, and a harsh look came into his face. Michaud was afraid he had been insolent. Feeling himself grow pale, he hid his face in Olga’s hair. Then, ashamed of his weakness, and still faintly tremulous from fear, he raised his head, and blurted out :

‘Monsieur, you have lost the war.’

‘Really, Monsieur Michaud,’ protested Tiercelin. ‘Really, really !’

‘We are winning everywhere,’ said Captain Hatzfeld with a smile. ‘In France, Russia, Greece, Norway, and on the sea. For the moment, no army exists that can stand up to ours. But the enemy is hard at work, and though his chances seem very faint, it is possible, after all, that we may lose this war. . . . If we do, it’s just too bad,’ he added after a moment’s silence. ‘We shall win the next one.’

‘There won’t be a next one,’ replied Michaud.

‘Monsieur, you do not know Germany.’

¹ Captain Hatzfeld joined the plot against Hitler in 1944. He was hanged by means of a butcher’s hook thrust into his throat.

With these words Captain Hatzfeld got up, took his leave, and went to the bar to pay for one of the bottles of champagne drunk at M. Tiercelin's table, which he himself had ordered. Michaud was about to do the same, but his host forbade him, adding that he should be really hurt if Michaud insisted. The conversation dragged on for a few minutes, and then silence came upon the table. Michaud, shamed by his fear of the German officer, was gloomy and irritable. Tiercelin excused himself on the plea of having matters to see to, and left him alone in Olga's company. She made him drink the last glass of champagne, and again began the game of embraces, whispers, clinging hands. His gloom vanished, he became more animated, and recovered the state of excitement and intoxication which had come upon him a little while before. Olga's methods of expressing her liking for him were perhaps unconventional, but he didn't see any harm in that. There was an ardour and abandonment in her behaviour, revealing a naïve and sometimes childlike sincerity, that was extremely charming. She managed to convey, without precisely saying so, that she was wholly disinterested, that she wanted nothing from him but his affection. He was genuinely touched. 'A bourgeois,' he thought with a touch of pride, 'would be scandalized and indeed embarrassed by such true goodness of heart.' Suddenly he realized that it was getting late, and announced that he must go. 'Yes,' she said simply. 'Let's go.'

While Olga was making-up in the lavatory, where the barman brought her a five-hundred franc note on behalf of M. Tiercelin, Michaud said good-bye to his host, and thanked him for his friendly reception. They exchanged a few further rapid comments on domestic discipline, and M. Tiercelin made him promise to come back and spend an evening at the *Pomme d'Adam*.

In the pitch-dark street, Olga took Michaud's arm and led him unresisting through the night. 'If you only knew how happy I am,' she said more than once. Michaud, however, was not altogether happy. He was thinking of his wife and especially of Antoine, whose behaviour he had so cruelly suspected. However, he merely felt faintly uneasy, not in the least remorseful. He still closed his mind to the purpose of this groping journey, and once he said in a voice that rang false: 'Where are you taking me, my little Olga?' However, it was without the slightest hesitation that he entered the building where she lodged, and followed her upstairs.

'I can't stay very long,' he murmured as he took off his overcoat; and, in fact, he did not stay more than half an hour. She did not try to detain him, from fear of getting him into trouble at home. 'But I hate to let you go.' More than once she said how anxious she was to see him again, and as she had to be out of Paris next day, they arranged to meet in the afternoon of the day following, which was Easter Eve. As he was about to leave, Michaud seemed embarrassed, and timidly raised a hand to his breast pocket, but Olga stopped the gesture with a word or two of affectionate reproach.

It was not much after midnight when he got back to the Rue Berthe. Hélène was already feeling uneasy. The streets had been closed for more than an hour past except to those with special permission. He might have been arrested by a patrol. Michaud explained that he had been very well received at Tiercelin's place, so much so that he had found it difficult to get away.

'As for Antoine, I am quite easy in my mind. Tiercelin, who is an excellent fellow and seems very fond of Antoine, doesn't think there is any sort of love-affair. . . .'

Michaud talked at great length about his evening with

Tiercelin, and with quite unaccustomed volubility. But in the stream of hurried words, Hélène could not lay hold of anything that really tended in Antoine's favour. This man Tiercelin's optimism seemed to be based on nothing. She was astonished that her husband had allowed himself to accept mere affirmations. But his credulity surprised her even less than his general attitude of mind. Normally, when he repeated a conversation to his wife, Michaud, with a vague look in his eyes and his thoughts half adrift, plunged into a sort of soliloquy, embroidering comments into the fabric of his recollections, and straying at every moment into generalities. That evening he talked for her alone. He did not take his eyes off her, and the affectionate frank expression in them lent persuasiveness to his words, which really were addressed to her. Never had he seemed to her so truly present and so close. She was so touched, that she could not bring herself to oppose him and damp his optimism. Sitting on the edge of the bed, with a smile on his face and a friendly ring in his voice, he seemed to be striving to tell her everything without omission. In reality, he was feeling very uncomfortable at finding himself thus involved in a cycle of lies, the futility of which seemed to him obvious. He put imaginary remarks into Tiercelin's mouth in order to make him appear to better advantage, and in reporting his conversation with Captain Hatzfeld, whose existence he concealed from Hélène, he substituted other interlocutors, and talked of Olga as though she had been an elderly lady of extreme propriety. He who never lied, except from honourable necessity, was alarmed to find with what ease and assurance he moved in this network of mean and complicated falsehood.

Next morning he had a bitter awakening. He now thought of Olga without any thrill, as of a scarcely regrettable escapade, but the vision of his return to Hélène and

the nonsense he had talked, did beset his mind. The sickening savour of stale lies pervaded his whole being. As he was shaving before the mirror, he eyed himself with disgust, and muttered reproaches at his reflection. As he ate his breakfast in the kitchen with Pierrette and Frederic he felt particularly uncomfortable. He reflected that on the previous evening he had been drinking champagne with a German captain who might one day have Frederic shot. Even admitting that this was an unlikely chance, the spectacle presented to a German officer of a French pater-familiars sprawling publicly in the arms of a girl was in itself sufficiently disgusting. And then there was that shameful impulse of fear which he had not been able completely to conceal.

‘Papa,’ said Frederic, in a firm and rather aggressive tone, ‘I need some shoes. The soles are through and now the uppers have gone too.’

‘It’s true,’ said Pierrette, in quiet support of her brother, ‘his shoes are just coming to bits.’

‘Very well, then,’ said Michaud, ‘you must buy a pair.’

Frederic, who expected an outburst of ill-temper, was quite taken aback. His father’s manner was genial and almost pressing as he added :

‘And mind you get something solid, even if it does cost a little more.’

That morning Michaud was surprised to find himself almost running to his office. He was in a hurry to get back to the wholesome atmosphere of work, and especially to Lolivier’s friendship, which did not admit of any lies. When he arrived he had an altercation with Solange who had stood Eusèbe in a corner for being impertinent. With his nose against a box-file and his hands behind his back, the boy stood with drooping head, revealing the skinny, pallid neck of the lymphatic adolescent. Michaud was

highly indignant and ordered him back to his place, but Eusèbe threw a questioning glance at the typist before daring to move.

‘All right, go back to your place. This time, we’ll let you off.’

‘Let him off! You have no right to punish him at all. No one here has the right to punish him. The boy works for his living, but he’s free, do you understand?—free!’

‘Excuse me, Monsieur Michaud, I never allow myself to be treated with disrespect, either by him or anyone else. If you knew what he said to me . . .’

‘I don’t want to know,’ shouted Michaud. ‘Even if he had called you a bitch ten times over, that wouldn’t give you any right to punish him!’

This disturbance brought Lolivier into the room, and when he learnt what had happened, he too spoke severely to Solange. But he did so with rather less violence, and a few minutes later, in the next room, when he was seated opposite his partner, he took him to task for his loss of temper.

‘It wasn’t worth all that fuss. On the matter of principle you are perfectly right, but in this particular instance, it was little more than a sort of elaborate game based on accepted conventions, and I am sure the boy enjoyed it as much as Solange did. Your interference must have seemed to them as tactless as it was absurd. Of course I may be wrong. An episode of this kind between two people always tends to be a little difficult to see through, especially when the parties are a woman and a boy.’

‘I was certainly a little sharp,’ agreed Michaud. ‘But I’m rather off my balance this morning. Something happened to me last night.’

He told the story of his evening with Tiercelin, without omitting the German officer, nor Olga. He experienced

a sense of relief from speaking quite candidly. As he recalled the half-hour spent with Olga, he felt his ardours and emotion of the previous evening revive. The adventure appeared to him no longer as an incident to be forgotten, but as a starting-point. He thought with pleasure of his rendezvous for the following day.

'She is so charming and unaffected: and so warm-hearted. Gentle but passionate. And such a pair of legs, my boy! I'm only bothered on account of Hélène. When I got back last evening . . .'

Through Michaud's words, Lolivier tried to form an opinion on Tiercelin and Olga. He did not question his friend's sincerity, but was inclined to suspect that he had been a little taken in.

'Listen, old man, you really distress me. You've no idea what an old has-been you sound when you talk about your Olga. But you're only fifty, and still quite presentable. I honestly don't think you're cut out for that kind of adventure. Just think of the state you were reduced to, when you got home last evening, by the simple fact of having slept with a girl you picked up. And you talk of seeing her again. It's idiotic. You were living a quiet life, rather up in the moon perhaps, with your wife and kids, and you are going to be fool enough to complicate your existence with a café tart.'

'Olga is not a tart.'

'Let us assume she isn't. But a woman who takes you on after drinking a glass of champagne with you is nothing very out of the way, and certainly nothing to get excited about.'

'What a bourgeois you are.'

'What a damn fool you are!'

Impressed by Lolivier's wisdom, and secure in his friendship, Michaud was on the point of adopting his view,

but before they could finally agree a chance remark diverted the conversation, leading them to discuss the observations of Captain Hatzfeld on the previous evening, in particular and prominently : ‘ If we lose the war, it’s just too bad ; we shall win the next.’ The consideration of this single pronouncement impelled them to weigh, classify and compare sundry values and probabilities. They agreed on nothing. Their tempers rose. They thumped on the table, they appealed to the Almighty. The quarrel soon became more violent than the one at the end of Chapter II. When it subsided from sheer weariness, and they set to work again, their foreheads still flushed with wrath and their jaws contemptuously clenched, each of them began to sort out in his own mind the various subjects of discussion they had embarked on since the morning. The opinions which they had, on whatever score, respectively maintained were stubbornly pigeon-holed in those two smouldering craniums. For Michaud, Olga now stood for the highest values of western civilization, and his desire for her as a sincerely democratic and socialistic attitude of mind.

ELEVEN

ON the evening of Good Friday, Michaud was dining in silence with Pierrette and Frederic when Malinier rang the bell. Pierrette went to the door and announced in a quavering voice that a German officer was asking for Antoine.

‘I told him that Antoine wasn’t here, and he said he wanted to speak to his parents.’

Michaud got up, and caught an anxious glance from Frederic who had become slightly pale.

‘Are you sure that it was Antoine that he asked for?’

Malinier played his part rather feebly. Clad in a green raincoat which reached down to his heels, and holding his cap in his hand, he looked rather more like a gas inspector than a German officer. However his high black boots, which could be seen gleaming beneath the half-opened raincoat, lent him a certain authority. His grey hair was equally effectual. He bowed slightly to Michaud, and said in a deliberately rasping voice :

‘Monsieur Michaud, I have been informed that your son, Antoine Michaud, is not at home? Is that so?’

‘My son is not here. What do you want him for?’

‘I want to question him about certain activities which seem to us suspicious. I must ask you to tell me where he is.’

‘I have no idea.’

‘Indeed? Permit me to feel astonished. You have a son of seventeen, and you don’t know his place of residence.’

This intentionally lumbering speech seemed to Malinier so comic that he guffawed into his cap. Michaud thought his laughter ominous. The officer insisted on Antoine's address, but in vain, and emphasized that the father's silence merely made matters worse for the son. Whereupon he saluted and withdrew in apparent dudgeon, but just as he was going out he was overcome by an access of remorse, and felt he must relieve the father's mind.

'Don't you worry. It isn't a matter of great importance. He is not in any danger.'

'Hypocrite,' said Michaud savagely, when he had gone. 'One knows how to take that sort of eyewash.'

He went with the children into Hélène's room, and told her about the visit. The mother could not restrain her tears at the thought of the risk run by Antoine, and the suspicions with which she had regarded him.

'And we were wondering why his report was so bad, poor darling.'

'With a little imagination, and knowing him as we do, we might have thought of it,' said Michaud ruefully.

After the first alarm, Pierrette thought that this was all very satisfactory, and felt almost pleased. She was rather enjoying her parents' remorse. At the same time she revised her view of Antoine's amour. The dame of twenty-eight was no doubt a German, the wife of a Minister or a General, whom he had seduced in order to get information. At night, just as he was going to sleep with her, he of course gave her a narcotic. Towards midnight he got noiselessly out of bed, donned a mask of black velvet, searched the offices of the *Kommandantur*, and signalled from the window with a candle. Pierrette was proud of Antoine, and a little distressed for her brother Frederic, who did indeed distribute leaflets, but had seduced nobody, and functioned

without a mask. However, she was careful not to reveal the lady's existence. The parents would not have understood. Frederic, for his part, was annoyed with his brother for not having mentioned his secret, the more so as Antoine knew that he distributed leaflets. It showed a lack of confidence.

'The Germans may come back and search the place to-morrow,' said Michaud. 'Perhaps even this evening. We must remove everything that might be likely to compromise him, and above all any letters that would reveal his address. All the same it's a bit of luck that he is away for a holiday. He might quite well have been here. I'll go along to Tiercelin later on and see if he has any news ; and I'll ask him to let Antoine know that he's wanted by the Germans.'

He collected Antoine's letters, and looked in the drawer of the lad's table. As he turned the pages of an exercise-book, he came upon a scribbled note, unfinished and containing only two lines : ' Yvette darling—I'm writing this in the algebra class so that you will get it before midday. I wanted to tell you how much I love you . . . ' Michaud read the two lines several times with a good deal of emotion. He thought of Yvette as a bright-eyed little girl with her school satchel under her arm. At such a moment, this boyish love-affair, and that naïve letter, so full of youthful freshness, were singularly touching. Michaud put this precious bit of evidence away in his letter-case. While the compromising papers were burning in the dining-room fireplace, the father turned to Frederic and said to him abruptly : ' And what about the leaflets in your drawer ? ' Surprised to learn that he knew of their existence, Frederic could find nothing to say.

' Naturally,' growled Michaud, ' You never thought of them. You great booby ! If the Gestapo had got hold of

them, we should all have been done for. God forgive you for a fool.'

Frederic went into his room to get the leaflets. His father's abruptness had wounded and distressed him. He thought that his courage and devotion were not properly appreciated, and could not help thinking with some resentment of his parents' anxious comments on the risks run by Antoine. When the leaflets had been burnt in their turn, Michaud made up his mind to go to the *Pomme d'Adam* bar, but talked to his wife for a little while longer. He grew suddenly alert, his eye brightened, and he did not seem in the least annoyed at having to go out. Before starting, he went into the bathroom, to wash his hands, brush his hair, and smooth his bushy eyebrows. Frederic rather wanted to go with him, but his father's words still rankled, and he thought it more dignified to stay where he was. Michaud departed alone.

'I expect she'll be back by the evening,' he thought, as he made his way down the dark slopes of Montmartre. 'She may very likely go straight to the bar. Indeed it's more than probable that she will go there on the chance, hoping to find me. She will ask me to go home with her as she did yesterday evening, and it will be difficult to refuse. Indeed, why should I refuse? My son is wanted by the German police, and I am of course very anxious, but that is no reason why I should reject a woman's love. Bourgeois who like their fun, but especially those who have turned respectable and avoid amours on principle, have imposed their absurd and disgusting notions on us, which I am not sure I have entirely shaken off. In reality, genuine love is not mere pleasure, it is enjoyment or an enfranchisement from Self. We must not forget that love is the blending of two entities, in joy as in sorrow. Yes—as in sorrow. And if, at the hour of my greatest misery, I abandon myself in Olga's

arms, it is not to forget that misery, but to lend it depth and force. Hypocrisy? No. Besides, I'm not trying to justify myself. I purge my consciousness, I clear out its deposit of conventions, in order that my affections as a father may be more at ease and find a wider scope. I know, I feel, all that this girl's affection may do for me and for Antoine. So sweet she is, so graceful, so ardent and unaffected . . .'

Michaud lost himself for a moment in intoxicating visions of Olga's room, where, to tell the truth, his parental anxieties had not seemed very pressing. As he groped his way down the Rue Pigalle, a soft voice, perhaps the one that had called to him on the previous evening, suggested love. He declined in a dry, ironic voice, and with a curt, self-satisfied laugh. Continuing on his way, he felt sorry for the poor fellows who follow girls into their squalid lodgings, and make love as though they were operating a slot machine. And Michaud thought that a man must be very base or very callous, knowing his son to be in danger, who let himself plunge into such degrading pleasures. However, this reflection appeared to him both stupid and hypocritical. It suddenly filled him with a kind of nausea, and he became aware that for the last quarter of an hour he had been cramming himself with the crudest lies. 'I really am a rotten fellow, cowardly and inconsistent; one of those revolting individuals who lead an irreproachable existence in order not to imperil a principle in the muck-heap of their conscience. I have, for my own pleasure, constructed a certain idea of man, and instead of verifying it in my own person, I have spent my life conforming to it in order to demonstrate its truth. And one day when I want to sleep with a woman, I treat myself as an exceptional case, and prove to my own satisfaction that I remain loyal to man's noblest aspirations. As if a man couldn't at the same time be concerned about his son, and sleep with Olga or

any street drab, or even murder a bank cashier. Do I genuinely believe that everything in myself ought to be as consistent as in my concept of a man? Do I think paternal affection ought to form part of a symphony. Do I. . . .’

Michaud crossed the street. When he reached the other side, his foot missed the pavement and he fell on one knee. He was rather shaken, and his knee hurt him badly. The bottom of his overcoat was wet, and probably splashed with mud. It was so dark that nothing could be seen. He walked on, cursing and limping as he went. The pain made him forget all about Olga and paternal affection. He was in a very bad temper. A blueish glimmer filtered through the curtains of the *Pomme d’Adam*. Michaud tried to find the door that led direct into the bar, but without success, so he went into the restaurant.

A smell of fish reminded him that the day was Good Friday. Dazzled by the vivid light, he looked round for M. Tiercelin, and caught sight of him at the far end of the restaurant, talking to a client. Tiercelin did not seem to have seen him, and Michaud advanced a little way into the restaurant to make his arrival known. He had from politeness averted his eyes, and was vaguely watching the hurrying waiters. Suddenly he stopped, dumbfounded. On his right, so near that he had only to reach out an arm to touch him, Antoine was sitting beside a young woman. And Michaud recognized, opposite the pair, the German officer who had come to make enquiries at his home. Antoine sat stricken, with a face of horror, and eyed his father as though he had been a ghost. It never entered Michaud’s head that his son had played a trick on him. Thinking that the boy had fallen into a trap set by the German officer, he was meditating intervention, when Malinier got up to offer his apologies.

‘Of course it was quite unpardonable on my part, and

I now wonder how I could have let myself be got at in this way, especially as these bedroom affairs leave me quite cold, I assure you. I did refuse at first, but the young folk gave me no peace and said they couldn't live apart. Especially Yvette. You know what women are. When they take a fancy to someone, there's no holding them. I said to Yvette . . .'

When he had grasped the truth, Michaud was siezed by an access of fury. Leaning across the table he grabbed Antoine by the lapel of his coat and dragged him off his seat. He had raised his hand to box the boy's ears when Malinier and Yvette interposed. Antoine had made not the slightest motion to parry the blow. He now took a dispassionate view of the situation, and regarded his father's wrath as an inevitable step in the return to normal. At the neighbouring tables the diners were displaying much interest in the disturbance hoping that it would develop into a fight. M. Tiercelin, crossing the room behind Michaud's back, had vanished through the door to the bar.

'Little wretch! So you weren't ashamed to take part in this revolting farce! You might have killed your mother. You knew she was ill, and that such a shock might be fatal to her, but that didn't stop you! Little ruffian! Little beast! You're crawling with vice and falsehood. It wasn't enough to lie to us about your holiday, you wanted us to worry about you, and pity and admire you as well! Scoundrel! When I think of your brother! Little pig! Deliberately counting on our anxiety and distress, upsetting the whole family, and all for a pack of lies! All on account of a tart!'

'Monsieur,' protested Yvette, 'I must ask you not to use such language.'

'You shut up! You ought to get under the table and die of shame. But don't think you've heard the last of this

business. I'll set the police on you, and prosecute you for abducting a boy under age. We'll see if there's still any justice in France, and prisons for women of your sort.'

Antoine attempted to plead for Yvette but his father silenced him with a lifted fist. Malinier did not escape, and had to submit to some scathing comments on his uniform. Seething with rage and indignation, Michaud, his eyes ablaze, his face scarlet, raised his voice and began to bellow in the fashion he usually reserved for Lolivier and his secretary. Suddenly he broke off in the middle of a phrase and caught his breath. Olga, smiling, and with melting eyes, had just appeared at his side. She snuggled against his overcoat, and clasping her arms round his neck, imprinted a long and languorous kiss on his mouth. He tried to shake her off, but she merely clung to him more closely.

'Darling, I'm so happy. I hadn't meant to come, but something told me you would be here. Did you hope to meet me too? I did feel so awful when you left me yesterday. I couldn't get to sleep. I kept on wanting you. I was so unhappy. But you won't leave me to-night, will you?'

Not knowing where to look, or what to do, Michaud lost his head. Each one of Olga's words seemed to proclaim his downfall as a father. Antoine had averted his eyes, quite ignoring the fortunate nature of this episode. He was even more embarrassed than he had been a moment before, and would have far preferred to go on enduring the weight of his father's wrath. Yvette watched the scene with a smile of amusement, and tittered contemptuously. Malinier had taken occasion to sit down again and seemed rather depressed than otherwise by the turn of events. From the other side of the room, near the bar, M. Tiercelin surveyed the spectacle with a chilly gaze, apparently devoid of irony.

Olga, still clinging to Michaud, went on talking about love and their plans together. He bent over her, and murmured a few words into her ear.

'I am very sorry,' said she. 'I didn't know you were with your son. Why, there's Yvette. How are you? I didn't notice you at first.'

Yvette reached a hand across the table and said for all to hear, ignoring a silent appeal from Antoine, who was afraid of a reprisal :

'I didn't know you were M. Michaud's girl-friend.'

Olga laid a finger on her lips, and turning to Michaud, said she would go and wait for him at the bar. He nodded in order to get rid of her, and dropped on to a chair beside Malinier. Pale, and with beads of sweat on his forehead, he gazed vacantly round the table. Gradually he recovered his composure, and took a clearer and even more mortifying view of his situation. 'Let us go,' he said to Antoine. Yvette tried to protest, but he silenced her by repeating curtly that he would prosecute her for abduction of a minor. He then asked if there was anything to pay, but the party had not yet begun their dinner. They were waiting for Paul, who had some business in a street near by. He came in just as Antoine and his father got up to go. He grasped the situation at first glance, and was not much perturbed. When Michaud reached the door, he handed him a large envelope, and, after making himself known, said :

'These are rather important papers concerning Antoine. You can look them over when you get home.'

Michaud slipped the envelope into the breast pocket of his jacket and went out, ignoring the cry of anger and distress which Yvette could not restrain when she saw the papers disappear into his pocket. Paul shook hands with Antoine and bowed to his father, who did not respond.

'You had no right to hand over that money !' stormed

Yvette, when Paul came up to her. 'You ought to have given it to me.'

'It doesn't belong to you. Antoine made it. As he would have been fool enough to let you have it, I knew I had better hand it over to his father.'

'You admit he would have given it to me.'

'Yes, I believe he would, but there's no sense in his doing so as it's all over. You'll have to look after yourself now.'

Michaud and Antoine walked side by side through the merciful darkness without exchanging a word. Michaud was thinking about M. Tiercelin, and realized that he had been Antoine's accomplice: but it did not occur to him that there could be any such connection between Olga and the proprietor of the *Pomme d'Adam*. He was only angry with Olga for being so tactless, and giving way so thoughtlessly to an impulse of affection. Antoine, under cover of the night, reflected that his father's mishap might well make it easier for him to see Yvette again. As they passed down the Rue Pigalle, they were accosted by two girls who flashed a pocket torch on to them, and thought to tempt them by describing the delights that awaited them. Their invitation stung Michaud like a mockery. He had made up his mind to break the silence when they got to the Place Pigalle, but his courage failed him.¹ He felt that his voice

¹ Crossing the Place Pigalle, Michaud bumped in the darkness into a man called G  rouard, who had been a friend of his in days gone by. The two men apologized without recognizing one another, and went on their ways. They often thought of each other, and each would say: 'I wonder what has happened to him. I should so much like to see him again.' That evening, after colliding with his old friend, G  rouard walked down the Rue Pigalle, and met the two girls who had just accosted Michaud. He followed one of them into a hotel bedroom and caught a venereal disease. He was treated by a specialist, with whom he struck up a friendship, and joined a Resistance Group to which the doctor belonged. Arrested by the French police at the end of 1943 and handed over to the Gestapo, he was deported, and then hanged.

must sound false and repellent. It was not until they turned into the Rue Berthe, about a hundred yards from home, that he decided to speak. He laid a hand on his son's shoulder, stopped him, and said quietly :

‘ I am not speaking to you in anger. Indeed I have no longer the right to be angry with you.’

Antoine muttered a protest indicating that he of course admitted his father's right to get into a temper.

‘ Just now,’ Michaud went on, ‘ I was hardly in a position to call you to account for your behaviour. That young woman, who is in love with me, is rather impulsive, and too frank in the expression of her feelings. Not realizing the state of affairs, the poor child just leapt into my arms in the eagerness of love and youth. I don't know what you thought : or what you think now.’

Antoine stood in blank amazement, staggered by his father's guilelessness. Indeed it frightened him. The night and the surrounding silence emboldened him to speak.

‘ Forgive me, Papa, but there is something I must tell you. I think you are quite mistaken as to the part that woman played this evening. I have known Olga for several days now, from seeing her at the bar, and I can assure you that when she came up to you, she knew perfectly well you were with your son. Indeed that was why she came up from the bar. M. Tiercelin had gone to fetch her. So she knew perfectly well what an awkward spot she would put you in with us there.’

‘ What's all this ? ’ growled Michaud. ‘ Are you crazy ? ’

‘ I'm sorry, but you don't seem to realize that M. Tiercelin arranged your meeting with Olga. The truth is that she did what he had told her to do. . . .’

There was not much more to explain. Michaud now knew enough to grasp the meaning of his adventure.

Antoine's unexpected arrival caused as much joy as

astonishment. His brother and sister embraced him, his mother held out her arms. Then they all agreed that he looked very much run down. The father himself watched this explosion of affection with sardonic disapproval. Hélène was alarmed by his attitude, and asked if their son was in any immediate danger. Michaud shook his head.

‘You must run away now,’ he said to Frederic and Pierrette. ‘We must have a little talk with your brother.’

Pierrette realized that her father had got wind of Antoine’s adventures of the previous day, and Frederic also suspected that there was a woman behind all this. The idea that his parents could be hard on their brother now that the Gestapo were at his heels, made him indignant. As he left the bedroom he threw a stern look at them.

‘Antoine has deceived us,’ said Michaud in a dejected tone. ‘He didn’t go to Burgundy, he has been spending a week with a lady called Yvette. As he proposed to live with her indefinitely, he tried to make us think he was wanted by the police, and had to disappear. The German officer who came here this evening was in the plot. I saw him sitting at table in Tiercelin’s place with Antoine and this same Yvette.’

Standing by his mother’s pillow, Antoine stared dismally at the toes of his shoes. As a matter of fact, the episode was going off reasonably well. He was grateful to his father for having described it so unemotionally, and now regarded him as an ally. Hélène wept in silence. Antoine suffered most. His mother, he knew, was not lamenting her son’s lies, but his love affair. Michaud was sitting beside the bed, his elbows on his knees and his head in his hand. Feeling something irk him in the pocket of his coat, he drew out the large yellow envelope which Paul had handed him as he left the restaurant.

‘What’s this?’

The envelope was full of five-thousand franc notes which fluttered on to his knees. In all his life Michaud had never seen such a sum. Hélène, forgetting her distress, sat up in bed, and watched the fortune overflowing from her husband's hands. Antoine almost smiled at his parents' stupefaction.

'It's the money from a deal I did with Paul. There should be seven hundred and fifty thousand francs,' he said composedly.

The enormity of the figure left Michaud too dumbfounded to respond. At the sight of an honest and penurious man's prostration Hélène's heart went out to her husband, although at the same time she felt a sense of admiration for this strange and prodigal son, who brought such sheaves with him on his return. Antoine's eyes were again down-cast in embarrassment. He recalled the evening when, in that same room, his father had produced five thousand-franc notes from his notecase and handed him one of them. Perhaps, with his five thousand francs, his father thought himself rich, as he had thought himself in bliss with Olga. This beloved parent seemed to him so defenceless, so simple, that Antoine's heart swelled with tenderness.

'But, God in Heaven, what's the meaning of this? What sort of a deal have you been in with Paul? Perhaps you will kindly explain?'

'Well, then: one of Paul's connections suggested a job of five thousand coffins to be taken off at once. Very handsome and elaborately finished oak coffins. Paul transferred half of them to me, and as I had heard of a man who was looking for coffins, I was able to sell him mine without even having paid for them. To be more exact, the vendor deducted a commission for Paul and myself.'

'How dreadful' said Michaud turning to Hélène: 'What do you make of it?'

'We are living in such strange times that one can't be astonished at anything.'

Hélène was not particularly shocked. The coffin job even seemed to her to contain an element of humour, and she could not restrain a smile. Michaud was upset that his wife did not share the feeling of indignant amazement that possessed him. Collecting the five-thousand-franc notes he slipped them back into the envelope, which he threw on to the dressing-table with a gesture of disgust. 'Go to bed now,' he said to Antoine, 'We will talk about this again to-morrow.'

Hélène kissed her son warmly, shedding a few more tears, and Antoine wept a little too. Before going out, he raised his forehead to his father, who touched it with his lips, as had always been his custom in the evening.

'Well,' said Michaud, when they were alone: 'What on earth are we going to do with all this money? I suppose we had better give it to the National Fund?'

'I don't see any reason for that. It isn't stolen money.'

'Look here, Hélène: we can't keep money made out of a deal in coffins. Do think for a moment.'

'I just don't understand you. The fact that this money has been made by selling coffins is no more shocking than if it had been made by selling sacks of flour.'

'Obviously,' said Michaud. 'But it's a black market job.'

'What if it is? Aren't most things done on the black market these days? We have to put up with the way things are in our own time.'

'I don't agree,' retorted Michaud. 'In that case, theft, pure and simple, and even crime can become normal conditions of existence. Besides, whatever you may say, there is something repulsive in this coffin affair, and in the vastness of the sum, to begin with. Seven hundred and

fifty thousand francs made in the twinkling of an eye ! It's an insult to human endeavour, to the worker who toils from morning till night to earn his bread. An insult and an act of treachery ! '

In reply to her husband's objections, Hélène protested that life could no longer be conducted on a sentimental basis, or in accordance with a certain idea of humanity only realizable in the future. She stressed the money troubles that always confronted the household—worn-out clothes and linen and shoes, and shortage of food. She drew so dark a picture of their domestic difficulties that Michaud became alarmed.

'What embarrasses me too,' he admitted, 'is to take all this money from a boy like Antoine. That really does embarrass me.'

'Don't let it. With these seven hundred and fifty thousand, Lolivier and you could do business on a scale which would enable you later on to pay Antoine back for what is really just a loan. Antoine will have simply put money into the firm. Besides, I am perfectly certain that these seven hundred and fifty thousand francs aren't bothering him in the least, he isn't even thinking about them. He won't say a word about it to his brother and sister, you'll see. I know him.'

Antoine did not in fact mention the seven hundred and fifty thousand francs to his brother and sister. When Pierrette was in bed, he told the story to Frederic, omitting the money and his father's escapade. Frederic was particularly interested in the week spent with Yvette. He asked his brother if they slept in the same bed, if she had large breasts, if she had showed herself naked to him, if she had had her courses while he was there, if they had made love between meals, and how, and whether she had suggested it.

'What's it like to spend a night with a woman ? '

‘Marvellous. It’s as though the night was coloured, instead of being black—something between pink and blue. In the morning you think you’re waking up in a meadow. The day begins with a taste of honey.’

Antoine had feared he might disappoint his brother by admitting that he had never been in any peril from the Germans, but Frederic paid little attention to this. He pictured with envy and regret those coloured nights, those enchanted awakenings in a married woman’s bed. And it was not without a certain bitterness that he thought of his partisan activities, and the rigours of a cause that did not provide such glories and delights.

‘And all that time,’ he said gloomily, ‘I was bicycling through the suburbs.’

TWELVE

EUSÈBE picked an envelope from the left-hand pile, imprinted the firm's stamp on the corner and transferred it to the right-hand pile. The task was proceeding slowly, and he had already stuffed into his pockets some fifteen envelopes stained with ink or badly stamped. When he tried to hurry, his hands got out of control, he mixed up the two piles, and dribbled on to his blotting paper, or even on to an envelope. There were also the typist's legs. Eusèbe knew that it was all wrong to look at a woman's legs, especially those of a woman older than himself, but he could not help a furtive glance at them now and again. Sometimes his gaze lingered. For several minutes he sat motionless, deprived of will, his eyes set and his lips parted, and his heart hammering in his chest, for he retained enough consciousness to be afraid. On Saturday morning, no doubt in view of the week-end, and possible jaunts in the afternoon, Solange came to the office in silk stockings. She usually wore socks and bare legs. Silk stockings lent a stylized elegance to feminine legs which was specially calculated to arouse Eusèbe's curiosity. Solange was in process of reading over a letter which she had just typed, and was sitting a little back from the table, when she dropped her pencil. For some time past she had happened to drop something more than once in the course of the day. At first Eusèbe did not realize what a polite youth should do, until Solange enlightened him. It was for his good. There is no better recommendation in life, she said, than good

manners. The pencil had fallen between her feet. Eusèbe, in bending down, overbalanced, saved himself by catching Solange's legs, which he continued to hold, one by the calf and the other by the back of the knee. While reading her letter Solange paid no attention to this embrace. She opened her legs. Eusèbe pressed them to him. He was breathing in heavy gasps. Suddenly she gripped the boy's head with her knees, and thus held him prisoner.

'Ah, I've got you!' she said, slapping him on the back of the neck. 'You little pig! You dirty little scamp! I was sure you were up to no good. You sometimes look at me in a way that makes me frightened. Steeped in vice at sixteen—how degrading! I ought to tell your mother. And she thinks you're a good boy, poor woman.'

She had stopped slapping him, and was holding his head in her two hands. He did not struggle. Her face was flushed, and she was talking volubly.

'You little wretch! It's really disgraceful to be thinking of such nasty things at a time like this, when France is invaded, and more than a million prisoners of war are suffering in Germany. And everything so dear. Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Your mother can't make both ends meet, and you think of nothing but women. You have committed a disgusting act, Eusèbe. If only you had been honest about it—everybody has their impulses. But to take advantage of a pencil—and I never dreamt of such a thing!'

Solange was in such a state of excitement that she did not hear the door open.

'Solange, come into my office,' said Michaud.

The secretary jumped and abruptly pushed Eusèbe away. He got up painfully, and with a dazed look lurched back to his seat. Solange, with crimson cheeks, followed her employer into the other room. Michaud was annoyed. Except that he felt little disposed to remonstrate, he seemed

to be getting involved in feminine affairs. He sat down heavily, and remained silent for a moment. Solange stood in front of him, trying to assume a nonchalant attitude.

‘What has just happened is extremely regrettable,’ he said at last. ‘We have in our employment a very young boy towards whom we have responsibilities.’

‘If I told you how he behaves you wouldn’t believe me. He is young, of course, and he looks innocent enough, but he’s like a man in a lot of ways, I can assure you. He is always pestering me, and pawing me about, and saying the most dreadful things. I always have to be on the look-out when he’s around.’

‘Nonsense. I saw you, and I know what to think. Besides, I know Eusèbe well enough to be certain that nothing happened of his own will. You were not merely a consenting party, you provoked him and egged him on ; and that’s putting it mildly.’

‘Perhaps I did a bit, I honestly don’t quite know. Things sometimes happen without one’s knowing how. One is weak, Monsieur Michaud, and the war sets one on edge. I’m not speaking of coupons and queues, or the price of things. But morals have suffered. The war is so ghastly. The occupation, the prisoners, the air-raids, the misery everywhere—it fairly breaks one’s heart. One lives on one’s nerves, and isn’t always in control of oneself.’

Michaud was on the point of flaring up at this hypocritical explanation, when he reflected that it did seem to rest upon a basis of truth. He could picture what this long war winter had been like for Solange ; the metro in the evening, the suburban train, the walk through the icy darkness, the fireless house, the dinner of vegetables boiled in water, the lamentations of the family, the air-raids in the night, the awakening in the dawn, another walk through the darkness, train, metro, work in a barely heated office,

home again in the evening : and his feeling for her was one of sympathy and compassion. In view of his escapade with Olga, he felt little qualified to sit in judgment on his typist. Like him, she was a poor creature, ill protected against the surprises of her body. He even doubted whether the incident was as regrettable as he had thought it at first. Perhaps it was all to the good, and would stir Eusèbe out of his vegetable torpor.

‘All right,’ said he, ‘we will say no more about it. For the future, try to be more dignified, and keep your distance with Eusèbe.’

‘Don’t worry, Monsieur Michaud ; these things only happen once. I won’t let myself be caught a second time.’

Taken, as she had been, in the very act, Solange had had a bad moment. It was not that she feared any reprisal. But she dreaded the possible contempt of the two partners. But the paternal, almost benevolent tone of Michaud’s admonition completely reassured her. When the effects of his surprise were over, he seemed to see in the affair no more than a slightly indecorous episode, not quite appropriate to the routine of an Estate Office. Her conscience was now at rest.

‘Please ring M. Lolivier at his flat,’ said Michaud. ‘I’m afraid he may be ill, or that something has happened to him. It’s a quarter to eleven.’

Solange, as she returned to her place in the other room, flung a smile at Eusèbe, and lifted her skirt like a dancer to the level of her thighs. The boy sat for a moment quivering all over, and slaughtered three envelopes in succession.¹

There was no answer from Lolivier’s flat. Michaud was

¹This incident did not produce the consequences expected by Eusèbe. That afternoon, taking advantage of the week-end, Solange went to the cinema, and happened to sit beside a strikingly handsome young man of twenty. During the interval, she conducted a dashing conversation and showed her legs to such purpose that her nose passed unobserved. Having become the handsome young man’s mistress, Solange behaved very harshly

much disturbed. Moreover, he was eager to tell his partner the strange things that had happened on the previous day, and, with his aid, to conduct a survey of his conscience. He wanted to evoke all the events of that notable evening, to observe Lolivier's reactions and extract his views, ironical and contemptuous though they might be. He had not yet been able to assess the significance of an adventure in which he had been engaged on several levels. It should be an inexhaustible subject for meditation, and above all an experience from which he ought to derive some improvement. Michaud had a sense that he had played and was still playing a part in an agonizing tragedy of almost superhuman grandeur, for which an audience was needed.

Lolivier arrived at eleven o'clock. He was haggard and unshaved, and his lips were set and drawn. He came in quickly, threw a muttered good-morning to Michaud, and seating himself at his table in his usual way, he took some papers out of a drawer and arranged them in front of him. Then he began to talk very rapidly.

'Has Oudard telephoned? I see that no letter has yet been sent to Boussenac. We must see how the work is getting on at the Rue Damrémont. The concierge at the Rue Eugène Carrière seems to be taking a long time. Yesterday, after you had gone, Lestang telephoned. Nothing doing at the moment. Solange had better type the letter this morning. My son is in gaol.'

'What's that you say?'

'He was arrested last night. I was informed this morning about eight o'clock. He is at the police station, I wasn't allowed to see him.'

At Michaud's further question, he jerked his shoulders in to Eusèbe, continually reproaching him for his evil ways, and making fun of his sickly appearance. 'You little pig, you've just been looking at my legs, when I have forbidden you to do it. Who do you think you are, Eusèbe?' Eusèbe's distress was such that he fell ill and died in a sanatorium.

a movement of doubt and weariness, and then he answered, in a single outburst, without raising his eyes.

‘An unspeakable crime. He was living in a cellar on the Rue de la Charbonnière with a girl and an Arab, as he had been kind enough to let me know. He and the Arab killed the girl, and sold her in sections like butcher’s meat. It was in trying to sell the pieces that they were arrested.’

Michaud stood for a moment agape with horror, without finding a word of sympathy to utter, staring down at Lolivier’s cranium. He pictured the monster, a boy he knew, well educated, polite and rather shy ; he pictured him with reddened arms, cutting human flesh up with a knife. But worst of all was the thought that the father himself was a victim of this nightmare butchery. Michaud thought of his own children, and, realizing his happiness, could not restrain a thrill of selfish joy. The adventure of the previous evening seemed to him suddenly insignificant and remote. Antoine’s escapade no more than a school-boy prank. Lolivier was thinking of his son—a murderer. He saw the cellar, the Arab’s busy hands, the disembowelled girl, and the little boy who had caused him so much concern—chicken-pox, colds, attacks of liver, bad reports—assiduously cutting off a limb, hacking through the sinews, or throwing an armful of entrails into a bucket.

‘So that’s that,’ he said.

Michaud walked round the table, put an arm round his neck and took his hand. Lolivier gripped it with all his strength, and began to sob in dreadful, rattling gasps, as though exhaling all his misery and horror. There was nothing to be said in consolation. Michaud managed to utter a friendly word or two but without effect. This monotonous plaint, like the wail of a dying man, frightened him at last. He shook his partner by the shoulders, and shouted : ‘Stop that ! Speak to me !’

Lolivier did stop, dabbed his eyes with a handkerchief, and sat for a moment vacant-eyed. Then he again took Michaud's hand and raised it to his lips : ' You are all I have.'

' I am your old friend,' said Michaud.

' I daresay he won't be guillotined, on account of his age.'

' He certainly won't, I'm quite sure of that.'

Mechanically, in order to recover the thread of his thoughts, Lolivier began to arrange the papers on his table. After some minutes silence, he began to talk about some repair work, then, suddenly switching off, he said in a bitter tone, in which the whole man was expressed :

' I am, in a way, a privileged person. I shall never have known what the war was. It will have added nothing to my load of misery. I am like that tenant of ours who married Clementine. His joy excludes him from the disasters of war. I know there are widows, orphans, families broken up, but I have my own hell, and that burden is enough. I have carried my peace-time existence intact into the war. I am told that Hitler is master here, that our young men are prisoners-of-war in Germany, and that the English bomb our cities. But what does come home to me is that my daughter and my son have developed into what I knew they would become, she, a harlot, and he, something less than human, and that my wife is still the slut she always was. The awful anniversaries of these last years will not be those that others recognize. I am something less than human myself, as all unhappy people are. I know, and I knew before the war, that suffering does not expand our hearts, and that great ordeals do not improve our characters. They drive us in upon ourselves and condemn us to the blackest and most joyless egotism. I shall never think of the miseries of France, or the miseries of Europe. I must live with my

obsession, as though I were shut up with a savage, snarling rat.'

'Don't go home,' urged Michaud. 'Come and stay with us. It will be less depressing for you, and I shall feel easier in my mind.'

'Thank you, but it's impossible. I must go and find my wife. Poor old hag, she doesn't have a happy life either. She needs me so as to be able to hurl insults in my face, to curse me for having bullied the boy and driven him into crime. She will also tell me that I have ruined her stage career. All the same, I think she'll be too shattered to make much fuss. In time of war, a disaster which is outside the war, and has no national significance, is a trifle discreditable. Ours is doubly so. But I'm talking nonsense, and there's work to do.'

Lolivier tried to make a start, but sudden attacks of absentmindedness and lapses of memory prevented him from getting anything done. Sometimes he would stop in the middle of a gesture, and holding his breath, stare at the inkpot or the blotting-pad. To take his mind off his troubles, Michaud told him about the late Solange episode. Lolivier burst into maniacal laughter, and forgot his nightmare for a few minutes. He was still laughing when Eusèbe came in to announce Madame Lebon.

Lina was wearing the same garments as on her last visit, but her pinched little face was transfigured with joy. She kissed Michaud, leaving dabs of rouge on both his cheeks, and dropped an affectionate tap on Lolivier's pink cranium. Her gaiety burst forth in her shrill, high-pitched intonations.

'If you knew, my dears, how happy I am! I have so great a joy that I cannot tell it. You will never guess what has happened to me.'

'Are you going to be married, Lina?'

'Oh no, Pierre, you are stupid. Me, a poor little Jewess,

what man could I marry ? No I am not getting married. It is so much better, what has happened. Yesterday, at the end of the afternoon, a visit came—two people. One, a woman, I did not know, the other a friend of Warschau, I have often seen him at the house. Warschau, you know, I complained, he has gone and never writes, never any news. I thought, he is so hard a man, he has put me there, poor watch-dog look after yourself, damn you. Gestapo, he did not worry about, nor money either. Oh, he left me without a bean, but when he went he said : “I don’t give you much, it’s better for you : you live quiet little life, you won’t be noticed.” Perhaps he was right, but I was sad in my little life, and always so afraid of Gestapo, I chattered my teeth, and I thought Warschau, I shan’t see him until the end so far away, and I think one day I get so frightened I shall be found dead in the little life. So listen : Warschau so hard, no pity, he has had pity for me, he saw me poor thing frightened, he does not leave me, he sends for me to Algeria.’

Lina was to leave on the following Thursday, and before she went she wanted to cancel her lease. An Aryan tenant was to succeed her in Warschau’s flat, which he was to take over as though it were empty. Michaud and Lolivier gladly agreed to the arrangement. Lina was in an ecstasy. There was only one shadow on her joy. The new tenant proposed to take an inventory of the furniture in her presence, and it was to be feared that Warschau would hear of what she had sold in his name.

‘I got rid of all little things, little bureau, little card table, and little drawings too. But if he hears, he’ll curse me up and down. Above all, he not forgive me for selling badly. He will despise me so. When I think, I feel my insides give way. But perhaps Warschau, he will not remember.’

‘Don’t think of it, Lina. Think only of your luck.’

‘Come with me, both of you. You sell the office and you come with the wife and children. Or if you have a tiresome wife, you leave her there and try again Algeria. Afterwards, it’s America, and all over with the black sky, black days, and all black things, and little eye of the Gestapo. Come with me. Here you are sad dogs, which they always come to rob a thing from their masters. You fear to show what you are, and sometimes fear not to show enough. Even those for collaboration, they fear to lose the Germans. Even those who think nothing, they fear because they think nothing. And fear for a father, fear for a friend, for tomorrow, for air-raids, meat, coal, black market. But over there, no more fear. Jew or not, no one bothers. You think no matter what. You put what you like into life. Great or small, it is always yours. In Europe, that will never be again, even after the occupation is gone. The old things must be left to the rats. Over there you find freedom, light, sky, and all the things that are for life. And when you want to despise and be nasty—like everybody does sometimes—there are the niggers. Oh I wish I were there already. Come with me.’

‘I,’ said Lolivier, ‘do not sigh for freedom. I no longer want it.’

Michaud for his part was thinking that he now had enough money to go, and take his family too ; he tried to let himself be tempted, but without success. Life in America seemed to him as unattractive as life in the beyond. For him, it was a phantom existence devoid of substance, it was nothing.

‘Forgive me that I clear out,’ said Lina. ‘I propose to you to go, but America you don’t give a blast. Both of you are true Frenchmen, you don’t like freedom. You are so much with things, houses, streets, gardens, that if you go away, you take only a little of yourselves. And your ideas,

they are things. I have been stupid. Well, I come back to see you Monday with new tenant, but I speak no more of going away.'

It was nearly midday when Lina left the office. The two partners went out about one o'clock. They had a longish way to go together. Lolivier had relapsed into his nightmare, and did not utter a word. Michaud made some vain attempts to break the silence and take his friend's mind off his troubles. Finally, in desperation, he told him about the seven hundred and fifty thousand francs that had just come into his possession.

'I won't tell you how they reached me. That is unimportant. Take it that the money was a legacy. Anyway, I have got seven hundred and fifty thousand francs, and I really feel quite embarrassed by such a sum. I'm not used to having money. My wife says that you and I ought to pull off some big business deal.'

'She is right,' said Lolivier, 'but it isn't just a question of pulling off a deal. It's a matter of going into business. We are excellently placed to make a success of it. We are in touch with various contractors, and we have, among our tenants, people engaged in all sorts of activities. Why only yesterday, Brunet told me he was in need of several tons of steel wire. I gave him the address of Dujardel, our tenant in the Rue Caulaincourt. But if we had money, instead of giving him the address I would get him the stuff, and we could make three or four thousand at a stroke. Indeed, if you agree, I have another deal in view which can be put in hand at once. I even see two, one in cement and the other in shares. It's as easy as pie.'

Lolivier was no longer thinking of the crime. He was buying, selling, doubling his capital, and engaging in operations of more and more importance. He was soon thinking in terms of millions, and the Estate Agency was

no more than a pretext, a facade. He grew excited, and his little ferret-eyes glittered with enthusiasm. Michaud was alarmed by this afflux of money, this overflow of activity. He had never caught the fever of business and of figures, and wealth was no temptation to him.

‘Of course, we have good chances of success. I can even see that the risks are very slight. But, in the end, what’s the use of making so much money?’

‘It won’t be much use to me,’ agreed Lolivier. ‘I don’t want to spend money on my wife, and need nothing that money can buy. But money, after all, is money. I have run after it all my life, that I can’t waste a chance of picking some up. I, like everybody else, have been trained to make money. I’m like a man with a gun: when the bird flies past, I shoot. Besides, I exaggerate when I say that wealth will be no use to me. I like a good dinner, I like pretty girls, and I feel within me the makings of a dirty old man. I also think of my father who has always despised me for not being a success in life. The dear old man will now be proud of me. His millionaire son will make him forget his grandson is a murderer. Don’t let us talk lightly of money. What we put in our pockets protects us, by so much, from being abused and humiliated.’

In what he said, and what he went on to say, there was much bitterness, sadness and sardonic irony. But Michaud took it all as an assurance that Lolivier was getting into his skin again, and that his despair as a father had begun to subside. He was, however, only half satisfied, having a taste for emotional display. But when they parted, Lolivier seemed in excellent form, and had enough to occupy his mind for two days without thinking too much about crime and entrails.

When he got home, Michaud was greeted by an aroma of roasting chicken: and on the dining-room table there

was at least a hundred francs worth of flowers. This haste to take advantage of their good fortune seemed to him indecent. Hélène, who had got up for the first time on the previous day, resumed her place at the family table. The whole place had a festal air. Frederic was threatening to smack Pierrette's head for insisting that he took forty-threes in shoes, whereas he scarcely took forty-twos, and even a half-size less. The lunch was glamorously gay. Antoine was far from wearing the expression of dismay which would have become him in the circumstances. He was behaving with as much ease as though nothing had happened, and he were still a virgin. His father, who had resolved to raise the question of the report during lunch, decided to postpone the painful subject until later on. Nor did he mention the revolting crime committed by young Lolivier, thus deliberately letting slip the opportunity of emphasizing, for Antoine's benefit, the dangers of dubious company. Why evoke such horrors when there is peace and happiness in the home, and what is the use of moralizing? Michaud enjoyed his chicken, and smiled more than once at the pleasure of being rich. Happiness, even of the material sort, brings more than one fruitful lesson, he reflected, to dispel a twinge of conscience. Moreover, how can a man form a solid and impartial judgement on other men's lives if he has not himself had the experience of wealth?

'I must hurry,' he said before lunch was over. 'Colonel de Montboquin's funeral is at half past three. What a bore! Come with me, it will get you into the open air.'

Antoine, to whom these last words were addressed, displayed no inclination to accept, and excused himself on the pretext of a headache. Michaud would have liked to take him, to make sure that he did not spend a part of the afternoon with Yvette. However, he did not insist, the

recollection of Olga rather hampering him in the exercise of paternal authority. Nor did he venture to extract a promise.

A certain modesty had kept Antoine at home all the morning. He now thought he had done all that was needed to satisfy discretion and propriety. When his father had departed to the funeral, he announced that he was going for a walk to the Square Saint-Pierre, and ran to the Rue Durantin. Yvette was not at home. He went and knocked up M. Coutelier in the hope of getting some news of her. The inspector opened his door a few inches, and replied with emphasis :

‘Monsieur, I no longer know the person who dishonours that name, and refuse to speak of her. Good morning.’

The concierge not being in his lodge, Antoine had no other resource but to enquire from Paul. He found him in the cellar of the restaurant, occupied in sorting and checking wine. Taking off his blue apron, Paul laid it across a plank, on which they sat down side by side.

‘Yvette left this morning for Vendôme to spend a week with an old aunt.’

‘Did she get seats on the train?’

‘She went by car. A bit of luck. Some people going to Tours, I believe.’

Antoine asked if she had left a letter for him, or any message with Paul. No, Yvette had written and said nothing.

‘You ought to drop that affair,’ said Paul.

‘Don’t be a fool. Why should I stop seeing Yvette? I love her as much as I did yesterday, and even more. I shall go on seeing her every day as usual.’

‘You will do what you like, but what happened yesterday looked to me like the end of the story. In your place, I wouldn’t try to see Yvette again. You have three months

in which to prepare for the certificate. It would be idiotic to waste your time with a woman. If you like, I will take you to my aunt's two or three times a month. It's a very well run house. But don't mess up your examination. Besides, I think Yvette is afraid of your father. He talked of prosecuting her.'

'He doesn't know her name or her address, and even if he did, he wouldn't prosecute. It's not in his character. Yvette has nothing to fear.'

'Well, perhaps she has other difficulties.'

'It would of course be easier for us if we had that seven hundred and fifty thousand francs. I wonder why you gave them to my father.'

'True,' said Paul composedly, 'perhaps I oughtn't to have done. I think I must have rather lost my head.'

Paul's reply, the quiet tone in which he uttered it, were not untouched by irony. It was very improbable that Paul had lost his head. Indeed it was pretty certain that he had acted with deliberation. Antoine quite understood his motive in handing the envelope to his father: and he was annoyed with him, not over the seven hundred and fifty thousand francs, but because he was so resolutely opposed to his love affair. Paul really behaved more like an elder brother than a friend. It was a mistake to treat him with complete confidence. Even admitting that he was right—and this was far from established—but even admitting it, his was the point of view taken by families, older persons, and schoolmasters. A true friend ought not stop us from committing an agreeable folly. Irritated and depressed, Antoine got up to go. As he passed under the electric bulb, he noticed that one of Paul's eyes was slightly swollen, and there was a bruise on his chin.

'What have you been up to?'

'Nothing much. I had a scrap with my father yesterday evening. It will be all right tomorrow.'

'A scrap! but what about?'

'Nothing of any importance. I told him what I thought of him, and he lost his temper. Shall we be seeing you?'

'I don't think so. As Yvette isn't in Paris, I shall stay at home with my parents. They'll believe it's all over.'

Antoine, accordingly, stayed in the flat for nearly a week without putting his nose out of doors. His parents were worried about this seclusion, and urged him to go out. They felt all the more benevolent as, on the Tuesday after Easter, Lolivier had put through his first deal and made more than a hundred thousand francs. Michaud had bought himself a hat, and the whole family had renewed their wardrobes; a beige coat and skirt for Hélène, a tartan frock for Pierrette, and a sports suit for Frederic. The conversation at meals was devoted solely to dress materials, slips, vests, drawers, brassières, and shoes. Antoine, alone, had postponed a visit to the tailor. On the Friday afternoon when his mother pressed him to go out, he complied with apparent resignation, and was not out for long. In the evening, Michaud returned brimful of joy and enthusiasm. The two partners had made another three hundred thousand francs over a deal in scrap-iron.¹

On Saturday, in the early afternoon, Antoine again

¹ Michaud and Lolivier now control a capital of some fifteen million francs apiece. Their wives are supplied with diamonds, gold cigarette cases, clothes from the Rue de la Paix, and see a great deal of each other, having formerly met about once a year. The two partners are less generous to their mistresses. Michaud, who took to good living late in life, has high blood pressure and suffers from his liver. He still deludes himself that he is a friend to the working-classes, and looks forward to the establishment of social justice. 'I live in a sort of moral diving-suit,' he would say. 'Wealth cannot touch me.' But his perennial aversion to Communism is no longer based on the old reasons. Lolivier laughs at him. 'A very trifling adventure has befallen you. You were a bourgeois of the Left; you are now a bourgeois of the Right.'

yielded to his mother's appeal and went out. When he reached the Rue Durantin, he saw Chou coming out of the house. She ran up to him, and after an affectionate embrace, Antoine took her hand to walk to Yvette's door. The child trotted along beside him, but after a few steps she withdrew her hand and stopped.

'There's a man at home,' she said.

'What man?'

He learned that Yvette had returned in the late afternoon of the day before. A man had spent the night with her. Antoine tried to hope that it was her prisoner husband come back home. Chou also thought that the man might well be her father. In any case he was a soldier. He tried to get her to describe the uniform, but the child's vocabulary was not exact nor wide enough to make this clear. Suddenly she pointed to a group of German officers climbing the slope of the Rue Tholozé. The man had been dressed as they were.

'Not M. Malinier?'

'No, I know M. Malinier.'

Antoine stood for a moment motionless on the edge of the pavement, wiping his eyes with the sleeve of his overcoat. Chou asked him no questions, well knowing why he was so sad. Never again would she come upon them, lips clinging to lips, and looking at each other with languishing, animal eyes. It was now the soldier's mouth that clung to mummy's. Nor did he look like a languishing animal. He was rather terrifying; his blue eyes were hard and bulging. His shaven crown, covered with a short white bristle, flushed abruptly, and his fingers clutched at mummy's frock like spider's tentacles. But mummy seemed quite happy.

Antoine lifted her into his arms. Chou put hers round his neck, and laying her lips to him, looked at him with the

eyes of a melancholy cow. He smiled through his tears, but without that besotted expression that came into his face when he was with mummy. She was not very disappointed, realizing that she was not of an age or size for the play that made people look like that. Antoine set her down on the pavement, and wrote a brief note in pencil which they left with Yvette's concierge. 'I am going to the Medrano circus with Antoine,' said the note ; signed ' Chou '.

One could imagine that when Yvette saw the handwriting she would burst into tears, and remain plunged in dejection for quite a while. One could imagine even more heart-rending things. There were two very funny clowns at the circus. Chou laughed heartily : and so did Antoine.

THE END